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9. TRAIN YOUR ARROW UPON MY GOD, APOSTATE! (ACT 1)

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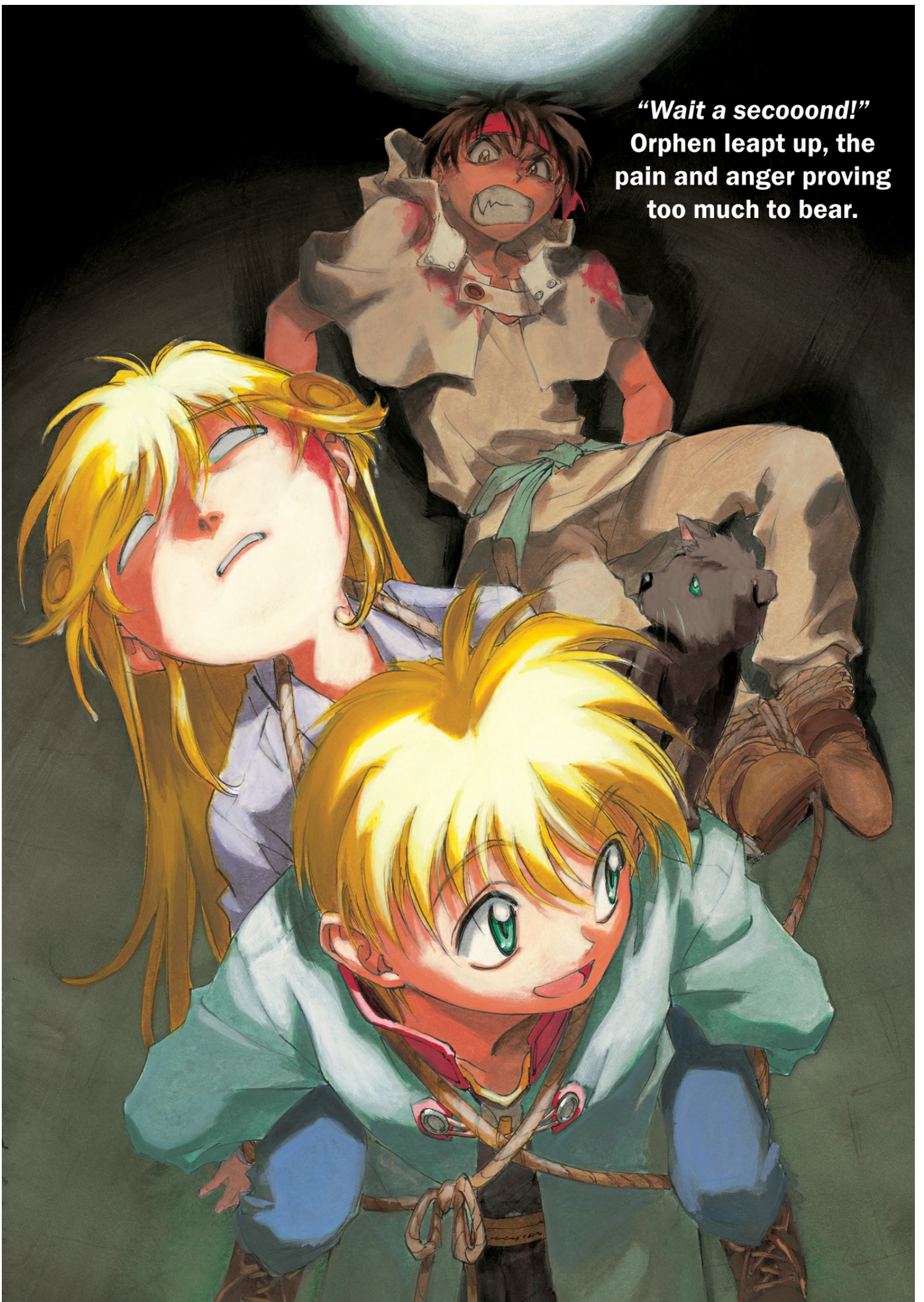
SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

9. TRAIN YOUR ARROW UPON MY GOD, APOSTATE! (ACT 1)



SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

"Wait a secocoonnd!"
Orphen leapt up, the
pain and anger proving
too much to bear.



**She was staring at
him. Neck broken,
hanging in the air.
Staring straight at him
with her green eyes.**



On the stairs, lined up as if they were taking a graduation photo, were dozens of priest soldiers.



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Prologue

He had, for the most part, been able to predict all this. There was no concrete reason for it. The feel of the air around his skin... the sound of the wind... he could even feel a humidity sneaking into the atmosphere. But those weren't reasons.

He just knew. He was sure of it, deep down in his heart, like something that had been established long ago. And it had been—even if “long ago” only felt like an instant to him.

His eyes were closed. They had been ever since her magic had wrapped around him. With his eyes closed and his ears not particularly strained, it was only his consciousness that was sharpened to a point. He quietly focused what you might call his night senses.

He was still not used to these “five senses.” For that reason as well, he was being perhaps overly cautious. Slowly, he urged his muscles to bend one of his fingers. He took several seconds squeezing his hand into a fist, then took twice that to open it back up again. Even the slight numbness caused by the chill of the night was new to him.

He opened his eyes. There wasn't much light. Above him, there was a canopy of branches and leaves from the enormous trees around him. He couldn't see the moon. *There might not even be a moon*, he thought to himself with a wry smile. It was only natural that the world would change. The world he knew and the one he now stood in... what was the same between them, and what was different?

There were some things that he knew. That he'd been told, rather. He could recall every word, every phrase that she had said to him, from the very moment of his birth. Her magic was so powerful that it was capable of that, and his feelings for her were even stronger than that. He knew they were.

He repeated such to himself. There was no need to put his response into words.

Instead, he calmly stood up straight. “So...” And he muttered something that had nothing to do with his answer. “...Is this... it?” At his own words, his mutterings, he narrowed his eyes.

“The world... wasn’t destroyed.” *But is that really true?* A doubt surfaced.

He filled his lungs with air and then expelled it. The cool night air was pleasant. He took another breath, this time not as deep. The clear air satisfied his lungs like nothing ever had before. He felt a smile come to his face unbidden.

Very well. I’ll bet on it. If this air is that of a destroyed world, then I shall submit to annihilation. He was starting to feel confident that it wasn’t, though.

He held his right palm up. His light skin stood out in the darkness. He stared at that hand—a hand he couldn’t believe belonged to him—and let out the breath he’d been holding, along with a spell.

“Light.” And a point of light appeared atop his palm as if forming the third point in a triangle with his fingertips and wrist. It wasn’t a flame, and didn’t waver like one. It was like a momentary flash of light frozen in time above his hand, bright white, devoid of color. It was the light of magic.

When it appeared, the light jumped slightly upward, as if bouncing off of something. Its movement then came to a stop just as suddenly as it had started.

He looked around the now-illuminated area. He was in a forest. He didn’t know much more than that. The elevation seemed high, but he couldn’t see the stars past the trees above him, so he couldn’t pinpoint his location.

He took a breath and lowered his eyes. The trunks of the trees were white like the light illuminating them. White earth. White grass. Even the moss growing on the trees was white.

Like his palm.

Another wry smile. Even that smile was probably as devoid of color as all the rest—though he couldn’t see it himself. Of course, the black robe that he wore was not the color of the light he had created. It was still black. “A color that permits no deviation,” according to the one who’d designed it. True, it was the only thing in the world around him that had maintained its color.

Well, I wonder... He thought with some irony. Maintaining color and simply not changing color. He had to admit they were similar, but they were not the same thing.

“They’re not... Not that it matters.” He put out the light and everything closed around him, the darkness deeper than before.

In the dark of night, his eyes alone shone. He could sense this. He groped around and pulled something silver out of a pocket. A naked dagger. A silver blade. The hilt felt right in his hand. This was likely the only thing that hadn’t changed.

He began to walk, soundlessly, and with only one question in his heart.

Chapter I: The Role of the Silver Blade

Quietly... a pale light filled the chapel with warmth.

Quo Vadis Pater walked silently through that light. The orange light seemed to ebb and flow in a way that was almost ticklish. It extended out in a circle, welcoming all who would set foot in it. A gentle, warm light.

The chapel was a more private space than the grand hall that was the main place of worship in the cathedral. Of course, that was assuming “privacy” was something the most powerful man in the church, Pope Ramonirok, even possessed. There were really only two things that were private about it.

One was the size of it. *...It can hardly be called a chapel*, he thought to himself without showing it on his face (though it was more that it was impossible to divine any sort of expression from his face in general). The chapel was extravagantly designed, but empty. All the furniture was of the highest quality—most of it imported from the capital and donated by the royal family itself. But not a single piece bore any mark of use, even though this was supposed to be the Pope’s private quarters. Since it was a personal room, it wasn’t too spacious, but its weak light source failed to illuminate the entire space.

The chapel was always bathed in light, yet the number of people who could touch that light was extremely limited. It was an even smaller number than those who were granted that abominable Final Audience.

The source of this light was simple. It was candlelight. The back of the chapel was blocked off with a thin layer of paper, and the candlelight shone into the room through that paper from behind it. The thin paper let the soft light through, save for where there was a single shadow.

One person sat beyond the paper: the highest authority of the Kimluck Church, Pope Ramonirok.

The pope sat completely motionless, but his shadow swayed with the light of the candles, growing, shrinking, never still. For that reason, it was impossible to

picture what he might look like from just his shadow.

And no one had ever seen more than his shadow.

“Instructor Quo.”

Hearing his name called, Quo flicked his eyes toward the voice—though to be truthful, he didn’t even want to do that much. “...Anastasia. How did you know it was me?”

The woman who stood still in a corner of the chapel answered swiftly, enunciating clearly, “I could tell from your footsteps.” Her eyes were closed, face pointed generally into the center of the room. Quo recalled she was still young, but the drab servant’s attire she wore seemed to age her considerably. On the other hand, her unkempt hair gave her the air of a child even younger than a girl. It had once been black, but had faded to grey.

Partly hidden under her hair, a scar ran from the end of one of her eyes across her nose all the way to her other eye. Both eyes had been gouged from her sockets.

I should be used to seeing it by now... Quo cursed quietly to himself. It didn’t bring him any joy to see the scar he himself had inflicted on the girl.

Anastasia spoke quietly, as if addressing a child, “I could recognize the Instructor who gave me his blessing as if he were my father.”

“...I see,” was all Quo said before averting his eyes from her. He told himself that it wouldn’t offend her since she couldn’t see him. “May I be honored with His Holiness’s words?” He stared at the shadow behind the paper as he asked. The shadow was moving, but what about the person throwing the shadow?

“His Holiness,” Anastasia started, reverently clasping her hands in the holy sign, “has not graced anyone with His words for three days.”

“I see,” he repeated, and began to turn around. Normally, this is where he should have recited a lengthy prayer, but it meant nothing that he didn’t do it, as long as he wasn’t in front of any of his subordinates.

But just when he faced the entrance, the armor and sword belt around his great frame clanked. That was not a normal occurrence. Especially with the

crimson plate he currently wore. It seemed thoroughly lacking as a defensive garment—all it covered was his chest and back, leaving his abdomen, shoulders, and neck exposed. Two partitions extended from his back like wings, but they were too odd a shape, and too large, to be mere decoration.

He wore two swords at his hip. A longsword in a magnificent sheath hung from his sword belt, and a sword of about thirty centimeters hung behind him from the belt of his pants. This one had a jet-black hilt and a jet-black sheath. There was nothing particularly elaborate about its design, but it was easy to tell that it wasn't made of any common steel.



It was rare that these items made any sound. The armor had so few parts it was basically just a single plate, and the two swords were secured carefully, so that they didn't hit one another. It seemed in his haste to leave the chapel, he'd bumped them accidentally.

"You're armed... Quo."

Quo turned swiftly back toward the rest of the chapel at the sleepy-sounding voice. This time, he didn't worry about making noise. He fell to his knees and made the holy sign, reciting his prayer. "We who inherit the holy blood of the progenitor Ymir—"

"Do not trouble yourself. Quo, are you armed?" The pope spoke haltingly, breathing in between long syllables.

Quo glanced to the side at Anastasia, bowed respectfully on the floor, and slowly lowered his head... "Yes," he stated clearly. In any situation, an Instructor could never be irresolute.

"Why?" The pope's voice was at once young and wise, inflection only ever giving a hint as to his intent. He spoke awkwardly, like a child who had only just learned how to.

Quo hung his head slightly. "...There's an intruder. I believe my subordinates have captured them in the Outer Ring, but if they escape, they will surely come here."

"A sorcerer again...?"

"Yes."

"Someone from the capital?"

"We're still investigating. But I don't think so."

If it was one of the Thirteen Apostles... *We would stand no chance*, he added in his mind.

The pope then said something else, tone completely unchanged, "A sword has broken. I just... found out."

Quo's eyebrows shot up at that, and before he could stop it, his whole body

was lurching upward as well. The word “sword” could only mean one thing to them: the blade Quo himself wore from his sword belt, a glass blade that was the symbol of the Death Instructors.

The pope continued dispassionately, “The Network... detected a glass sword breaking. In the underground.”

“It was Name. Name Only. They got past him.” He had no time to wait for a response. Quo got to his feet, forming a fist with his stiff fingers.

There was still no change in the pope’s voice. Tone dry as ever, he said, “The underground... So they’re after the Poet’s Chamber...?”

“I believe that’s likely.”

“Who’s handling tonight’s security?”

“Carlotta is gone. I’ll do it myself.”

“Very well. I’ll approve it.”

He hardly needed the pope’s approval, but Quo didn’t object. Naturally, there was no way His Holiness was going to say something like, “I leave it to you,” and there was also no way Quo would hope for something like that.

Still, he couldn’t help muttering, “If only Oleyl were here...”

“No.” The word was stated plainly, with no hesitation. “He saw my face. You will kill him one day. Understood, Quo?”

“Yes.” Quo nodded and turned to leave the chapel once more. However...

“Speaking of which...” The pope was not yet done speaking. “There was one other man who saw my face. You let him escape as well. I will have Carlotta kill you. Understood, Quo?”

“...Yes.” He nodded once more. He could not be irresolute.

Quo hadn’t stopped, so he was at the entrance now. There, the pope addressed him once more.

“Quo.”

“Yes.” Quo Vadis Pater stopped. It would be blasphemous to look over one’s shoulder at the pope, so he turned to face him once more and performed a

simple bow.

The shadowy pope beyond Quo's thinning hair intoned solemnly, "We who inherit the holy blood of the progenitor Ymir."

The Holy Words.

Quo repeated calmly, "We of holy blood."

The pope continued. "We of noble birth."

"Of noble birth."

"We of righteous destiny."

"Of righteous destiny."

The pope paused at the end. There was likely no meaning in it. He was probably just fatigued from conversing too much.

Quo, however, was in agony.

"We of holy death."

"Of holy death." Quo made the holy sign after his final response. And he glanced at the girl still prostrating herself on the floor—she was bowed down, hands pressed firmly to both ears. She was the only person permitted to interact directly with His Holiness, but she must never see what she must not see, she must always listen to what she must hear, and she must never hear what she must not hear.

Of course, the same could be said for everyone... Quo released the holy sign.

It was the dead of night, and dawn felt unbelievably distant.



What do you do when you feel pain?

It's a stupid question. You scream or you cry. Maybe you get mad. But if it's pain you really can't bear?

He quietly came to an answer. Quietly and quickly.

You smile. Feebly.

Orphen let out a breath, the corners of his mouth twisted up and his

eyebrows bent. It was definitely a smile. A weak smile that seemed like it could turn to tears at the slightest provocation, but a smile nonetheless. He was silent, because he knew that if he made a sound, it would be to cry.

“Master...?”

His head twitched at the sound of the uneasy voice of the boy behind him. He raised his head slowly, and even more slowly, turned to look over his shoulder at the boy’s familiar face.

He hadn’t even noticed the lights that had begun to illuminate their surroundings at some point... for the first time, he spotted the wisps of magic floating near his pupil. The bright white flames flickered, shedding light on him, his student, and everything else.

Him. He didn’t look down at himself, but he found himself imagining what he looked like right now anyway. What remained the same was the color of his hair and eyes—black. A dull, still color. But other than the red bandanna on his head, all the clothes he wore were not his clothes. He was clad in hemp from top to bottom, a fabric he wasn’t used to wearing. The white cloth had been so thoroughly covered in mud that it was now stained ocher.

His student. The boy was in a similar state. He wore a white cloak over his black shirt as if to hide it. He was peering Orphen’s way hesitantly, eyes filled with his usual scatterbrained, absentminded look.

Everything else.

Everything else...

He observed each in turn. The sorcerous flames that the boy had likely produced, wavering gently. The light undulating from them wavered in the same way. It illuminated everything around them. Without that light, all would be plunged in shadow.

They were in a giant underground tunnel. Its purpose was unknown to Orphen, but the sight of it seemed somehow familiar to him. Here and there in the vast passageway, he could see only the bases of largely collapsed support pillars; the fact that the whole tunnel hadn’t caved in was clearly unnatural. The walls surrounding the boundless darkness almost seemed to be smiling

hollowly. And all throughout the immeasurable blackness, yellow sand danced in the air, giving their surroundings the faintest color.

Aboveground, it was raining, making the air in the underground even more damp than it would normally be. Orphen felt an ache deep in his throat. The throat he'd used to scream at the top of his lungs earlier.

There was pain in his eyelids as well. The eyes that so desperately wanted to cry, but from which no tears would come.

There were countless external wounds tormenting him as well. The blood seeping from several lacerations had started to harden. His back and shoulder were purple with bruising. He may have suffered a concussion. And his right arm may as well have been broken. He couldn't move his hand or wrist at all. He didn't think the bone was completely fractured, but it was definitely cracked. The body he'd fought with.

His weak body.

He was suddenly all too conscious of it. His body was weak. He'd been wounded badly.

He'd been looking down at himself all too coolly, like the body didn't even belong to him. And at everything else, too. The boy carried a blonde girl on his back, unconscious and bleeding from the head. On the boy's shoulder was a small black dog, its tail facing Orphen. No, not a dog, a black-furred baby Deep Dragon.

That's right. I'm far too weak... Even as he observed them, his eyes weren't really seeing the boy or the girl or the dragon or anything else. The only thing he was really looking at was his wounded body. And... And the wounded body of the other man.

The man who was unmoving now, having succumbed to his wounds.

He lay just next to them like so much discarded garbage. Unmoving, blood sticking to his face and neck, eyes still open.

The man was dead.

He—Orphen—stood as if unseen hands were pulling his wounded body

upright. A sound he couldn't drown out in the quiet underground was clinging to him. A high-pitched ringing in his ears that seemed to exist only to call attention to itself.

Orphen took a breath.

"Master...?" the boy repeated. He looked at Orphen, eyes uneasy. His blue eyes seemed incapable of fully opening. "Is this person...?" He pointed at the corpse, still carrying the girl on his back. No... his finger was actually pointed at the floor next to the corpse. Maybe the boy simply didn't have the guts to point his finger at a corpse.

Everyone's so weak... Orphen looked down at the body. He didn't even have to adjust his gaze. No matter where he pointed his face, his eyes were always focused on it. On the man who had died with a satisfied smile on his face even while blood spilled from his ruptured eyeballs. He'd been a Death Instructor, one who defends the Holy City of Kimluck, the city above the underground where they currently found themselves.

"He's dead," Orphen muttered. His throat throbbed with pain as he spoke. He must have really damaged it with his screaming earlier. He could taste blood mixed with bile in his mouth.

"Dead...?" The boy repeated the word as if not comprehending it.

Orphen smiled faintly. No... it might have looked more like he was crying. "Dead. Killed. He attacked me. And I... had to kill him. There was no other way..." He said all that in one breath, then stopped, the air in his lungs used up.

Then he shook his head. "No. There was. I didn't have to kill him... He was just a normal human. Without sorcery or anything. I should have been able to beat him like I have until now..."

"Master?" His student said for the third time.

Orphen faced the boy and realized for the first time that he'd been speaking to him.

Was I... making excuses? For killing someone... He shook his head again, stronger this time.

“I’m not... that weak... ugh!” His contusions throbbed. His muscles were paralyzed, like he’d just taken a punch, and his knees buckled, sending him to the floor. He curled up, clutching his head. “Fuck!”

“Master?!” The fourth time. The boy rushed to him, clearly having trouble dragging the girl behind him.

Orphen clawed at the floor, glancing to the side to see his student get to his knees beside him.

A trembling hand touched his shoulder. “What’s wrong?! These injuries... Aren’t these bad?”

“Don’t... touch me...” Orphen grunted, tasting bile, his whole body trembling. He thrust his right arm out awkwardly—it wouldn’t seem to move how he wanted it to—and somehow managed to pull himself into a sitting position. He couldn’t even feel his fractured wrist anymore. Sand whirled in the air, blown about by his rough breaths. It felt to the ground as if to abandon him.

“I... killed him... Listen. He was a Death Instructor, and he set us up. This was all his trap, and he attacked me. I just... fought, like I always do.” *It’s an excuse! Stop making excuses!* A bitterness different from the bile spread through his mouth, but he ignored the voice in his head and went on, “Damn it! This has always been a possibility, every time I’ve fought until now. I’m a sorcerer! But, I... I couldn’t control myself...”

“Control?” The boy repeated. “You messed up your sorcery?”

Orphen could only laugh at that. “No.” He shook his head again, this time feebly. “I couldn’t control *myself*.”

The boy likely had no idea what he meant. He had nothing to say in response.

Still, after glancing at the corpse, then at his mentor, he said weakly, “I don’t really understand, but... you had to, right? I mean, you’re badly hurt too, Master...”

“I had to?” Orphen asked back. *I had to*, he repeated to himself. “I had to...” His voice was trembling, almost afraid. He was all too aware of the way his face was twitching.

It wasn't as if he felt he couldn't show that face to his student, but Orphen looked away from him all the same, returning his gaze to the silent corpse. "You think my lack of control was inevitable..."

"That's not... what I meant..." the boy said weakly.

He knew. Orphen was well aware of the boy's intentions. *He doesn't understand...* Orphen ran his hands through his hair, desperately wanting to claw at the pain in his head that wasn't fading. He was still wet with sweat and water. He ripped a few sticky strands of hair from his head as he clawed at his skull. The pain felt good. When you're in endless agony, a small pain almost feels pleasant. His lungs spasmed and he suddenly could barely breathe. He stopped scratching at his head and clutched his hands to his chest instead.

"A...a...a...ah..." He wrenched his spasming mouth open. He could feel saliva spilling out with the sounds. Or maybe it was blood from his lip that he'd been chewing on.

It wasn't a scream—it didn't have the energy. But the halting sounds weren't weak enough to be weeping either. He crumpled on the spot, crying out in agony.

"Master!" The boy pressed closer, raising his voice. He laid the girl on his back down on the floor next to him and asked, "Are you alright? Ahh, but... I think Claiomh's really in trouble too! She's unconscious and bleeding... but I can't heal her... right? And Leki's totally useless... Master!"

The boy's voice seemed to be reverberating inside his head instead of his ears. It was just his normal voice, but when it entered his ears, it seemed to bounce around in his head, transforming into shrill hysterics.

"Shut up..." Orphen groaned, smacking the boy's hand away.

But undaunted, the boy only raised his voice higher. "Master!"

"Shut up!" He struck out with his hand again, where the boy's face just so happened to be.

".....Ah....." There wasn't time enough for there to be any meaning in his utterance as the boy slowly fell back onto his rear.

He plopped down, holding his struck cheek, face blank. As he landed on the stone floor, his eyes met his mentor's for several seconds.

The hand he'd struck his student with didn't hurt. He hadn't even felt the impact. Orphen pulled the hand—his left—back, cradling it to his chest, and muttered, "Ah... s-sorry."

Hearing that seemed to set something off in the boy. "What is wrong with you?!" he shouted, jumping up and squaring his narrow shoulders.

"No... err, I, uhh..." Orphen scrambled back in an effort to avoid the boy's fury, but the boy went right on without giving him a chance to get a coherent sentence out.

"What do you mean, 'no, err, I, uhh'?! We suddenly get separated and then before I have any idea of what's going on, you go and get yourself that hurt?! And when I get worried about you and come closer, you hit me?! How is that fair?!" He shouted like he was using all the volume he could muster—like he'd forgotten that the whole reason they'd gotten separated was because someone's shouting had caused a flash flood. His face before had been completely blank in surprise, but there was heat in his expression now.

"Plus, you keep telling me I'm such an amateur, so you could protect me then, couldn't you?! Because you ran off somewhere, I got surrounded by those guys in white, you know!" He rambled on, pointing his finger at Orphen. "You've been weird since we came to this town, Master! You're all quiet like you're not confident in yourself, when usually you'd stand tall and mow down everything in your path, right?!"

"Er... Can't say I ever remember doing that, actually..." Orphen gingerly rubbed his aching right arm. It was definitely sprained, and he felt something off about the bone, too. Not that he couldn't heal something like this...

Heal? With what? Orphen's face went blank for a second at the abrupt question his mind had suddenly supplied, but he quickly remembered. *With sorcery. Obviously... This is stupid...*

He thought the mental exchange with himself had happened fairly quickly, but his pupil's annoyed voice pulled him back to reality and made him realize it must have taken longer than he'd thought.

“Master!”



“Wh-What?” Orphen put his good hand to his aching head.

It seemed his panic was winning out over the boy’s anger. He pointed at the girl on the floor next to them, brows knitting with concern.

The girl was limp, eyes closed, as if she were simply having a bad dream. Her breathing was deep. Her small frame was still, not shivering, but since her clothes were wet, there was a good chance her body was cold. There was a shallow wound on her temple that was bleeding, but not badly enough to be serious. What was serious was the possibility she’d been struck hard enough on the head there to open the skin.

The boy turned to half-face Orphen and told him, “I’m worried about Claiomh... I don’t know what’s wrong with her, but she’s not moving.”

“Well, people tend not to move when they’re unconscious...” he responded wearily, crouching down next to the boy near her. He parted the girl’s hair with his fingers to observe her wound. It did look shallow.

“...My wounds are way worse.” He let out a groan, then a sigh.

“But isn’t there a fundamental difference in your toughness and hers, Master?”

Orphen gave him a weird look, not sure whether he should be bothered or not by his wording. “I don’t think that’s true. This girl’s always—” He raised his right hand to point at her, then quickly pulled it back. The numbness in his wrist had become a dull pain by now.

“Are you alright?” the boy asked, concerned.

Orphen managed a nod. “Y-Yeah... uhh...” He blinked, forcing the world to come back into focus. That didn’t make the pain any better, but it wasn’t bad enough that he couldn’t bear it. He took a deep breath, then... realized he was forgetting something. “...What were we talking about again?”

The boy gave him a deeply suspicious look and asked, “Are you sure things are okay?” after a moment.

“Huh? Yeah... she’s just unconscious. Leave her be and she’ll wake up.”

“No, I mean... You’re acting kind of weird, Master.”

Weird? Hearing that, Orphen’s face went slack.

The boy just went on looking at him suspiciously. “It’s not anything in particular, but... just heal Claiomh, would you? Oh, but we should put her down somewhere dry first, right? Otherwise, she’ll probably complain.”

“R-Right.” He nodded, but said nothing more.

Orphen looked down at the girl, feeling for some reason like he was doing it to avert his eyes from the boy. She lay there, unconscious, eyes closed. A small, black dog-like creature paced restlessly beside her.

It was a simple wound. The cut on her skin was, at least. Easily healed by sorcery.

Orphen began to concentrate. It was something he had ample experience with. He wasn’t worried in the slightest about it. He weaved together the image of a spell, barely thinking about how to do it. At the same time, information about his surroundings flowed into him from the air where his sorcery took shape. The object he was attempting to alter was the girl in front of him. Nearby, there was also a boy and a dog-like creature. They were located inside an all-too vast underground tunnel. Sand whirled around them, the air was damp, and the only illumination came from white wisps of sorcery.

Aboveground, it was raining. There was one corpse. Far away, there were eight unconscious soldiers in white. There was one corpse. There was one corpse of a man he’d killed.

The boy. Come to think of it, what was this boy’s name?

What was the girl’s name?

Huh? ...What? He felt something strange.

Then suddenly, his vision warped, and Orphen fainted.



With no warning, Dortin sat up, his eyes snapping open. The sound of the rain, which had been falling for a full day now, was the only accent to the darkness of the night he found himself in.

The room was pitch black. Other than the faint reflection of some distant light

on the window glass, it was completely devoid of illumination.

He could hear Volkan's snores, which meant... *This must be his foot...* Dörtin removed the boot pressing into his face (the snores went on without interruption), and stood up. He groped around for a candle and lit the match stuck in the base of the stand, transferring the small flame to the wick. The flame wasn't big enough to overwhelm the darkness, but he was still happy for the faint source of light, and it was somewhat amplified by reflecting off of the grains of sand in the air.

Shaking the match to put it out, Dörtin pondered... The two of them, Dörtin and his brother Volkan, had been sleeping on the floor. Volkan, in fact, was still spread out in the middle of the room, sawing logs. The dwarves didn't really need bedding as long as they had the fur cloaks they always wore. But there *was* a bed in this room. Just like the room itself, the bed wasn't too big, and the quality was decent, though it was nothing fancy.

And that bed was empty.



He hadn't forgotten the role of the silver blade. She stood right in front of him now, close enough that she might already be touching the tip of it. He stood still, pinned by Isterviva's gaze. Her gaze and her words.

"...Destruction...?" he repeated.

She stood completely still, not responding to his words. There was only one thing her serene gaze conveyed.

"You..." he could only mutter, uncomprehending. He whispered, voice hoarse, "You're speaking the truth, aren't you...?"

"The truth?" This time it was her who repeated him. As if her own voice freed her from her paralysis, she moved quietly as she spoke, her green robe fluttering slightly. She gracefully turned her back to him. Perhaps *she* had forgotten the silver blade's role. The blade in his hand was meant to kill her.

Perhaps she hadn't forgotten.

"The truth..."

As she repeated the word, he stared at her back, just as paralyzed by it as he had been by her gaze. He couldn't move... *But I'm a Stabber! I was sent here to kill her!*

She turned back to him. Her movements were endlessly graceful, but her fists were clenched in a subtle display of her power. Her beautiful robe played a gentle melody as it rustled, but the limbs beneath it were stiff with tension.

Sister Isterviva. A Weird Dragon, their only priestess. That was her identity.

"What I tell you now is not such a beautiful thing as the truth." Shadows entered her green eyes like black needles piercing them. "It is no attempt at atonement either." The shadows quickly faded. Without them, all that remained in her eyes was a clear gaze—transparent and full of determination, as if they could reflect all the shadows in the world.

She told him, "I will pay for the sin of my silence now with the most vile of words. I will speak of reality."

She was sure of the silver blade's role.

Chapter II: She Hadn't Forgotten

Atelence Finlandi. Martha Finlandi. The names floated to the surface of his mind just before his eyes opened—and by the time the light hit those eyes, Orphen had forgotten them.

The names faded away, but he knew that they had been the names of the people who had brought him into the world.

The people responsible for his birth. They'd hardly been "parents" to him. They'd both died in an insignificant accident while traveling, right after he was born.

In any case, he'd never resented them for it. Most of the people around him were in similar circumstances. It was common for the Tower of Fangs, where he'd been raised, to scout out children with no relations and raise them as black sorcerers.

But why was I remembering something like that...? Maybe he'd just wanted to make sure he was alive. Or that he was a human being that two people had brought into the world.

Brushing off something heavy from his brow—though there wasn't actually anything there—he focused his mind on what his eyes were showing him. He was lying face-up, brilliant fairy lights peering down at him. Little specks of yellow sand in the white lights made them almost look like suns.

Lights like these were easily created with sorcery—just creating them was easy, at least. This could be said for any sort of sorcery, but lights like these in particular only had meaning if you could maintain them for a certain amount of time, so for that reason, they actually fell fairly high on the difficulty scale. Though they had nothing on truly difficult spells like gravity reduction.

Easy... sorcery. Right... a spell like this... Without putting much thought into it, Orphen tried to compose the spell himself, but flinched from a sudden headache... he was likely still concussed, so he wouldn't be able to concentrate

on any particularly complex thoughts. He was suddenly jolted by a sensation like all the blood vessels in his head were clogged up.

That really... hurts... It hurts like hell... Damn, that hurts... At that point, he finally realized what was happening to him.

“Wait a secooond!” He leapt up, or his top half leapt up at least, as much as the rope around his ankles would allow. His legs were bound together and he was being dragged on the ground like luggage. “What gives?!” he shouted.

“Master?!” It was Majic who held the rope, dragging Orphen behind him. He had Claiomh, who was still unconscious, tied to his back, and Leki riding on his shoulder. He turned around and his face lit up. “You’re awake!”

“Yeah, and what a grand awakening it was, being dragged around on these rocks like a sack of potatoes, you dumbass!” Orphen yelled and wrenched his ankles, easily slipping his right leg out of the rope. With one leg free, the other soon followed. He leapt to his feet, kicking up a cloud of sand.

Majic watched all this and remarked, “Wow. You know, you sure have some weird skills, Master. Like stuff that doesn’t seem like it’d even be useful most of the time.”

“Oh, shut it!” Orphen grabbed Majic by the collar, spit flying from his mouth. “Why the hell were you dragging me by the ankles?!”

“Well, if I dragged you by the neck, you’d die.”

“You’ve got a point there.” The response was so quick, Orphen reflexively agreed with him, then just as quickly shook his head. “That’s not a reason! You can’t drag a seriously injured person along on the ground!” He strengthened his grip on Majic, then suddenly realized... “Huh?” He let go of Majic and brought his right hand up to eye level, squeezing it into a fist a few times. There was no pain.

“Your injuries are healed,” Majic told him timidly. His body was turned away like he was trying to avoid being yelled at more, but his eyes were pointed in Orphen’s direction. “I wanted to do something, so I healed you... with sorcery.”

“Oho...?” Orphen narrowed his eyes and observed his right hand. He patted himself down too, but couldn’t find any external injuries. There was still a dull

pain underneath his closed skin, but that was to be expected.

Majic was puffing his chest out in pride. “How’d I do? Pretty impressive, right, Master?”

Orphen looked at the boy’s smug expression for a moment, then grabbed his right hand with his left and screamed, “Aaaaaaaaargh!”

“Wh-What is it?!” Majic’s eyes went wide as saucers.

Orphen shook his right hand and groaned, “You messed up your control, didn’t you?! I’ve got an extra finger here!”

“Whaaaaat?! Is that—Do you really?!” Majic wailed.

Orphen gave him a cold look, then silently raised his fist. “What do you mean, ‘do I really’?” He brought his knuckles down on Majic’s blond head. “The fact that you can’t say ‘like hell!’ to that with confidence is why you’re such an amateur!”

“Ugh... That’s not nice...” Majic crouched down, tears in his eyes.

Claiomh, on his back, had her eyes rolled back in her head. Leki jumped from Majic’s shoulder to her face.

Seeing her head lolled back like a corpse’s, Orphen crossed his arms. He didn’t feel much pain when he moved. *Well, it is pretty impressive, honestly.* Keeping his praise for the boy squarely inside his heart, Orphen muttered glumly, “So why’s Claiomh still knocked out?”

“Well, I could heal her with sorcery, but I’d be scared if I messed up.”

Orphen narrowed his eyes at Majic’s easy answer. “...But you weren’t scared to mess up with me?”

“Well, I sort of felt like if I left you alone, you’d die... And the soldiers I knocked out would have woken up at some point, so we couldn’t stay there, right? So I had to drag you.”

“Uh huh...” Orphen huffed. He groaned and looked around—the place they were in now, at least what he could see by Majic’s lights, didn’t look all that different from where they’d been before. He scratched his head. “How far did you drag me, anyway?”

“I don’t know... I took some breaks, but I’ve probably been walking about two hours.”

“You’re weirdly hardy sometimes, you know that? Whatever. Have you just walked in a straight line, then?”

“No,” he stated plainly.

Orphen smiled and pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. “Well, I just happen to have a map of the underground right here...”

Even as he said it, Orphen was sure of one thing and one thing only: they were completely lost.

Fires. Invasions. War.

There were plenty of dire situations—being hopelessly lost among them.

Orphen stared at the map, feeling depressed.

The sand-filled underground continued on forever, as if to mock them. After running his eyes across the map from one end to the other over and over again, Orphen was forced to admit it. “...These tunnels are seriously huge.”

“Are they?” After laying Claiomh down somewhere dry, Majic tottered over. He’d been dusting off the accumulated sand from her, but after determining that he’d gotten rid of enough, he’d gotten tired of that, it seemed.

Orphen tried to sigh away some of the headache he still had as he spread the map out so Majic could see it. “From what I can tell, all the pathways have the same width—exactly the same as the one we’re in now. This map only has the path from that bar to the exit marked on it, but it looks pretty accurate even at its reduced scale. Which means...” He traced his finger from their starting point to their destination. “I’d guess the route’s over ten kilometers. What the heck were they thinking when they dug these things?”

“Dug... what?” Majic asked, confused.

Orphen gave him an odd look. “What do you mean, ‘what’? These tunnels. I mean, clearly they’re not natural caves, so somebody must have dug them, right?”

“Now that you mention it, I guess you’re right...” Majic looked around and remarked, “There’s a lot of them underground though, huh?”

“A lot of what?” Orphen asked absentmindedly as he perused the map again. He could see Majic looking up at the ceiling out of the corner of his eye. He was probably thinking about the surface, but there were paths that slanted upwards and down in the tunnels, so they couldn’t even be sure how many meters underground they were right now. It probably wasn’t anywhere near 100, though.

“...You know, like, ruins,” Majic mumbled vaguely. “The one in Alenhatam was, and the theater we were just at, and here, too.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of Celestial ruins underground... but that’s because those ancient sorcerers were an underground people. Not sure why they’re called Celestials if that’s the case, but anyway...” Orphen waved a hand at their surroundings, still focused on the map. “This isn’t a Celestial ruin. Though it’s hard to imagine humans dug it either. Not even the capital has the kind of technology to dig such a huge series of underground tunnels.”

“It’s not Celestial?” Majic asked, and Orphen raised his head to look at him.

He looked from Majic’s face to Claiomh, still sleeping, and Leki pacing near her, then shrugged. “Celestials normally protect their dwellings with magic. And since their silent magic will continue functioning forever unless you physically destroy its medium, the Wyrđ glyphs, if this place were a Celestial ruin—” He smacked the fallen pillar he was using as a seat. “—it wouldn’t be this wrecked. Remember the theater? The walls were made of wood, but they didn’t even get scorched by a direct hit from one of my attacks. If you really wanted to take that place down, you’d have to destroy the matter of the building itself.”

“Destroy the matter?”

When his pupil asked the question, Orphen thought for a moment, deciding maybe now was the time for a lesson. With another shrug, he told him, “I doubt you could use it, but you might as well hear about it. It’s one of the ultimate forms of sorcery.”

“Uh huh...”

“I sort of feel like I haven’t taught you any magical theory, really—I mean, I will at some point—but, my teacher, Childman, theorized that the phenomena brought on by black sorcery could largely be split into three categories: matter destruction, wave neutralization, and meaning dissolution. Just like it sounds, all three of these entail eliminating something. However, if you destroy matter, that forms waves, and if you neutralize waves, matter solidifies. For those two, you have to end up with something in the end, either matter or waves. If you were able to reduce something to complete nothingness, then creation from nothingness would also have to be possible. But meaning dissolution accomplishes this by producing both effects at once.”

“...Umm, Master, I don’t think I really...”

“The important part is that the laws of physics don’t really matter. They’re there to explain the universal traits of all vocal sorcery. But if a being who doesn’t think like humans do used vocal sorcery, they would be able to use it in a way that doesn’t subscribe to our laws of physics at all.”

“...get it...”

“That’s apparently why dragon magic is completely different from the other races’ sorcery. Though there’s no way to study how thought patterns develop, the current line of thought is that they’re determined by language and the environment one’s raised in.”

“Uuugh...”

“Amateur, amateur!” Orphen jeered when Majic was finally reduced to tears by his lecture. He then cleared his throat and pointed at the map, bringing the conversation back around to something more relevant.

“Anyway. If it were a Celestial ruin, it couldn’t have been made more than a thousand years ago. That’s when they came to this continent, after all. And they disappeared about 200 years ago. In only that much time—it might sound like a lot to us, but that’s just how incredible their magic was—it wouldn’t have worn down this much.”

“What about our sorcery...?”

Orphen pointed up at the lights in the air. “Simple stuff like that lasts an hour

at most. They were on a completely different level than us.”

“I suppose so...”

Watching Majic earnestly agree with him, Orphen brought the conversation back even further. “So, from what I can tell, we’ve actually left the range of tunnels that this map covers. And I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find our way back into them... Those soldiers back there might have woken up by now...”

“Are there any other exits?” Majic asked, looking around him like one might just appear within sight. But with how vast the tunnels were, the illumination provided by his lights was just too lacking. No matter which direction they faced, all they could see was darkness. They couldn’t even see the walls, let alone the ceiling. All they could do was glance around hopelessly, like children left behind in the dark of night.

Orphen folded the map and put it away, groaning in thought. He massaged his temple, annoyed that his head wouldn’t stop aching. “The problem is, we don’t know what these tunnels were built for... If we knew that, maybe it would help us come up with something...”

“But... you know...” Majic put a finger up. “Doesn’t it kinda remind you of the place that was under Alenhatam? What was it called, Fort Basiltrice?”

“A fort, eh?” Orphen huffed. He stood and put his hands on his hips, stretching his back. When you healed wounds with sorcery, your body often felt heavy for a little while afterward.

“But if you’re making something underground, there’s no need to dig out such a huge area, and if you actually need this much space, why wouldn’t you just make it aboveground? If you dug out this much earth, you could seriously make a whole mountain with it, right? And it’s not even serving a purpose at this point. I mean, what was the point of this place?”

“Well, the people of Kimluck definitely didn’t make it, right?” Majic said, hand on his chin and face screwed up in concentration.

Orphen snapped his fingers. “That’s another thing. I’ve been wondering, why do the people of this town live in such a remote place? The Kimluck Church is

supposed to have originated in the north of the continent, and maybe these tunnels have something to do with that.”

“The Kimluck Church is, like... they worship goddesses or something?” An extremely vague question.

Orphen’s shoulders sagged. “You don’t even know that and you came all the way here? The Goddesses of Fate. Three sister goddesses who stole the secrets of magic from the dragons on the giants’ continent.”

“...” Majic seemed like he was about to say something, but he shut his mouth rather abruptly. There was something serious in his usually rather ingratiating eyes.

That gave Orphen pause. “What is it? I don’t think I said anything too harsh...”

“No, that’s not it.” The boy gave him a halfhearted smile. He put his hands on the white cloak he’d been wearing since they’d entered this town to cover up his black clothes. Almost wrapping his arms around himself. “There are thousands of people living above us right now who could answer that question, right? I just thought of that and this all seemed sort of stupid...”

Orphen fell silent at that for a moment as well, then stated simply, “Guess you’re right.” He smiled as well, in a self-deprecating sort of way.

Majic plopped to the ground as if just now feeling all of his fatigue and went on sluggishly, “Maybe if we can find our way back, we can ask those soldiers and they’d know. But...” He shrugged his small shoulders miserably. “They’d probably gang up on us and kill us first.”

Orphen had no answer for that. He was aware that what they—and others—were doing was completely meaningless, but hearing it from someone else really brought the point home. But Majic might have been feeling that even more strongly. He was being very talkative, in any case...

“But maybe we’re the only ones thinking that. It might be that no one’s thought to figure it out, so they haven’t...” The wry smile looked odd on his face. “What is this place, really? Not to borrow your words or anything, but this really is the definition of pointlessness, isn’t it?”

Listening to Majic’s murmuring, Orphen was thinking about something

completely unrelated. “I’ve been thinking this all along, but...” Orphen closed his eyes. “I’m really sorry to you two about all this.”

Majic made a surprised “huh?” sound.

With a feeble laugh, Orphen explained, “You guys just got wrapped up in my personal business. Just by being around me, you’re now in the middle of all this trouble that you shouldn’t be in. To be honest, I don’t even know what I’m doing in this city. It’s just like I told you before, I’m only here chasing after my sister.” He stuck his hand in his pocket, then realized he wasn’t wearing his usual black outfit. His weapons and the dragon crests that belonged to him and his sister were missing along with his clothes.

Taking his hand back out of his pocket, he squeezed it into a fist. “My sister—she’s not my real sister, but—I’m sure Azalie is in this city. I know her better than anyone else, and I know that when she says she’s going to do something, she does it. She’s somewhere here, and if I had to guess, she’s heading for Yggdrasil Cathedral, in the center of the city. I’m just trying to catch up to her. But...”

With a sigh, he opened his fist back up. “I don’t even know what I want to do when I find her. Maybe I want to tell her something, but... I don’t even know what it is. Do I want to help her? Do I want to stop her? Or...” He swallowed the words he was about to say next. Maybe before he even thought them up. So when he felt the pain in his heart, he didn’t even understand what was causing it. He shook his head, and...

“Well, that’s obvious, isn’t it?” Majic said cheerfully. “You’re siblings, aren’t you? You just want to be close to her, don’t you?”

“Close, eh...?” It was a complicated word. An apt one, too. All Orphen knew was that it wasn’t intentionally that Majic had chosen such a complicated and apt word. How could he understand something that even Orphen himself didn’t, after all?

“I’ve never been able to stand up to her... and now look where that’s—” He moved his eyes as he spoke, not looking anywhere in particular, but when they settled on a certain area, he froze.

Noticing his expression, Majic looked at him curiously and traced his line of

sight, turning around to see what he was looking at.

He didn't know what had happened. All he knew was that, at some point, with no warning... Claiomh and Leki had vanished.

"Gah! What the hell's going on?!" Orphen cursed, crawling over to the spot where Claiomh had been to investigate.

Majic followed him, beginning to panic. "But how? Why? She just disappeared?!"

"I don't think I can answer any of those questions... No, wait—" Orphen held Majic back. On the sand covering the floor, very faintly... "There's footprints!" Orphen whispered, pointing at the very slight imprints in the sand. He was worried if he shouted, he'd blow the fine particles of sand straight into the air.

He looked up at Majic. "Majic, turn the lights up. We can find her if we follow the footsteps, but it's hard to see them in the dark."

"R-Right." As soon as he answered—no, it took a moment—the orbs of light increased in brightness. They wouldn't last as long like this, but that hardly mattered in their current circumstances.

The footprints went on over the sand, all an equal distance from each other. They were so regular, it was like they'd each been carefully measured out. Orphen frowned at that, puzzling about it for a short time, but decided to put that out of his mind for now. He'd never seen the tomboy walk in such a choreographed way before, but that didn't mean she wasn't capable of it.

"Looks like they head straight that way..." Majic pointed in the direction the footsteps went.

"Yeah," Orphen answered, looking the same way. It wasn't the direction they'd come from. "Guess we've gotta go after her."

"But... what happened? If she was mad about us putting her on the floor, then I could see her jumping up and yelling at us about it, but not walking away without even saying anything to us..."

"Right... she wouldn't do that." Orphen licked the pad of his thumb. "So there

was some reason why she did this... or she was forced to. Come on, let's hurry."

Following the footsteps, at least, was not particularly difficult, since they were so regular, and all heading straight in one direction. They went on forward, regardless of fallen pillars, debris, or cracks in the floor.

No matter how far they walked, the underground tunnels never changed. The whole time, there was just the same dark expanse all around them.

Orphen tried to make haste through them, and eventually...

"Hm?" He strained his eyes. He thought he could see something yellow in the distance of the illumination cast by the fairy lights. Soon after, Claiomh's back appeared within the light.

"There she is." Orphen signaled Majic and sped up even more. The girl was walking unexpectedly quickly, showing no signs of noticing them, and Orphen leapt over some debris to chase after her. He overtook her and turned to get a look at her.

She was just walking forward, with her eyes closed, as if it were something totally natural to do. The wound on her temple was gone now, erased by Majic, he assumed.

Orphen wasn't too surprised to see her walking with her eyes closed—it wasn't as if she'd had any light to see with anyway. Still, she never stumbled. Atop her blonde head, the little black dragon sat, green eyes shining brilliantly.

"...I get it," Orphen muttered, synching his speed to hers.

Majic called to him from behind as he caught up to them, "Get what?"

"I thought it'd be something like this. It was this guy's doing." He indicated Leki.

"Him?" Majic also pointed at Leki and the dragon bared his fangs at the boy as if to intimidate him. Maybe he was mad at him.



“Remember Fiena? From Fenrir’s Forest.”

“Yeah.”

Orphen started explaining to Majic as the two of them jogged to keep up with Claiomh’s fast pace. “One of the Deep Dragons in that forest made her into his familiar.”

“Familiar?”

“Yeah. It’s a powerful form of dark magic, where you can share your senses with another creature. At that level, you can basically control the creature to do whatever you want. It seems Leki’s doing something like that now to control Claiomh with his magic.”

“...I thought he couldn’t use his magic here since it’s so dark.”

Unlike human sorcery, which used the voice as a medium, Deep Dragons’ dark magic used their eyes as its medium, meaning it could only affect what they could see.

Orphen shrugged. “He must be able to see in the dark. I’m more surprised that this little devil can do stuff without Claiomh commanding him to.”

“But...” Majic cocked his head in confusion. “Why’s the furball doing this?”

Orphen’s answer came quick, though in a dubious tone. “I’m guessing... since we weren’t healing her no matter how much time went by, he decided to look for someone else who would. It’s pretty immature, but now that I’m thinking about it, he is a baby...”

“Plus an animal.” Majic nodded, then suddenly tripped and fell flat on his face.

Claiomh... Leki, rather, kept going without even giving him a look. Orphen looked after them, then decided he’d better stop. He went up to Majic, deciding he probably didn’t have to worry about Claiomh for now.

“What are you doing?”

“Ouch...” Majic sat up, rubbing his face. “I just tripped on something... Oh, Claiomh’s leaving.”

“Huh?” Surprised by the direction Majic was pointing, Orphen turned to see Claiomh suddenly changing direction. “What? I thought she was just walking in a straight line... Does he have a destination in mind?” Orphen muttered to himself, lending Majic his hand. They chased after her again after Majic got to his feet.

As she sped out of the range of the light into the darkness, following the girl was not unlike trying to track an animal through a forest. It wasn’t only the dark obstructing their eyesight but the sudden increase of the sand in the air as well. They didn’t have to worry too much about losing sight of her, however, thanks to the easily spotted tail of blonde hair swaying in the darkness behind her.

“I wonder...” Orphen sent a look at Majic.

He seemed to have the same idea. “Yeah. If he’s trying to find someone who can help Claiomh... maybe he can use his nose or something to sense any people who are nearby.”

“...I’m not sure how much help that will be.” If there were any people down here, they probably didn’t actually want to run into them... and either way, none of the people in Kimluck were on their side.

“But maybe we can find the way out like this.”

“Hey, I’ll even throw a party if it’s not a way out that’ll get us in deeper trouble.” Orphen was having a hard time feeling optimistic.

Just then...

“Ah!” Majic yelped.

Claiomh had disappeared.

Orphen looked around calmly and pointed when he found what he was searching for. “She just changed direction again. I think she’s that way.”

And when they went that way, they found Claiomh, standing with her back to them in a shower of golden light.

Light. And not from Majic’s sorcery.

“It’s an exit!” The boy’s excited shout echoed through the underground.

There was some sort of giant fault in the ceiling. As if a huge landslide had occurred, the tunnels were significantly collapsed here. Layers of earth were exposed behind the walls. Dirt and rubble were piled up in mounds where they'd fallen. Since the tunnels themselves had crumbled here, the walls formed steep slopes, almost cliffs, but they looked like they'd have enough footholds to climb them. And from the ceiling, where the rift was, golden light spilled down to them.

The light wasn't too bright. It looked to Orphen like the light from a torch. It wasn't moonlight, at least. It might have been the sun if dawn had already come. He had no idea which part of the city this exit led into, however.

Claiomh stood still, underneath the fault. Orphen ran up to her... then stopped.

"...What is this smell?" Majic asked from behind them.

"Well, we were right about him using his nose," Orphen responded, covering his own nose with his hand.

There was a foul odor in the air. A stench that defied description. Orphen's headache, which he had almost started to forget, came back in full force at the assault the smell seemed to make on his brain. Majic was groaning, covering his head with his cloak.

Enduring what seemed like a coordinated assault by all the organs in his body to nauseate him, Orphen blinked his watery eyes. His sense of smell was already starting to numb as his brain attempted to accept the foul odor. Tears spilling from his eyes, Orphen nevertheless pressed on.

Needless to say, there was no breeze in the underground passageways, so the air had stagnated, concentrating the stench even further. Waving his hand in a pointless attempt to dissipate it, Orphen pushed through the cloying smell and walked on. He was acutely aware of a sense of impatience, of some *need* to press forward.

I've got a bad feeling about this... And he had a habit of being right about such feelings.

As he got closer to her, he was able to see what the heaps of rubble piled at

Claiomh's feet really were.

An innumerable quantity of human bones.



The sword in her hand slid forward.

Beyond the tip of its blade was a lone figure in the darkness.

The window behind her was open, its thin curtains fluttering in the breeze. The wind that accompanied the rain falling from the jet black clouds hanging in the night sky was blowing straight into the room.

"...Don't you think you should wake up, Carl?" The sword, which fit perfectly in her fingers, was thrust out at the figure lying in the bed, held completely motionless. Feeling the leather armor that protected her shoulders, Mädchen Amick glared in the cold, dark bedroom.

There were no light sources in the room. *And why would there be?* Mädchen thought snidely. If she rang the small, gold bell on the little round table next to the bed, a servant or two were sure to show up carrying some.

For that reason, she didn't dare raise her voice. Mädchen stared down at the figure on the bed, quieting even her breathing.

The canopy bed was absurdly large, and in order to point her sword at the person lying in the center of it, Mädchen had to raise one leg up onto it. She had her shoes on, but there wasn't much she could do about that. If she were concerned about proper manners, then she wouldn't have snuck into the room, dripping wet, from the window in the first place.

What will she be most upset about? That I woke her up in the middle of the night? That I pointed my blade at her? That I got the carpet wet? Such thoughts ran through her mind. A short while later, Mädchen noticed the figure atop the bed moving.

Twin glints appeared on the pale face framed by long blonde hair. She'd opened her eyes.

"You don't have to pretend to be half-asleep. I won't be fooled like your friend—I know you're wide awake, Carl... Carlotta Mausen."

“...You speak as if you know all my tricks, don’t you, my darling little Mädchen?” The woman on the bed sat up.

Seeing the private face of Carlotta Mausen for the first time, Mädchen instantly thought one thing: *I was wrong about her...*

She clucked her tongue without showing her thoughts on her face. *I’ve never liked her, since the first time I met her years ago. I thought, “Who the hell is this gaudy woman?” but...* She’d been mistaken.

Carlotta was a plain woman. Well, plain in a way you might call a black panther plain.

She sat in her bed, sheets pulled up to her chest to hide the negligee she was wearing. Mädchen couldn’t tell what color it was in the darkness. Carlotta stared at her with a calm, quiet expression on her face.

Mädchen’s sword pointed directly between her eyes.

Lips twisting into a smile, Carlotta chuckled as if overcome with mirth. “...If you’re going to threaten someone with a sword, I’d think you should point the tip of it at the throat or the gut—no matter how skilled you may be, you don’t really think you’re going to thrust that thing through my skull, do you? What are you going to do if I decide to fight back?”

“I’m not too worried.” Mädchen licked her lips. “I can’t imagine you’d risk marring your face.”

“...Well, I was lucky enough to be born with such a gift. I should take good care of it, don’t you think?” Carlotta was lowering her voice, Mädchen noticed—even quieter than her—in a situation where, if she raised it, she could quickly call someone to the room. But Mädchen had expected that.

She’s not going to call someone and have her own household spreading some ridiculous scandal about Instructor Mädchen holding her at swordpoint...

Mädchen was sure of that.

Carlotta would not panic and cause a scene. She was sure to remain calm and calculating in all situations. That was why she would not injure her face.

Mädchen felt sweat dampening the fingers around her sword grip. Not that it

mattered much, considering she was drenched from the rain anyway.

“There’s just one thing I want to know,” Mädchen whispered. “What did you do with Salua? You don’t really expect me to believe he’s out of the city at a time like this, do you?”

“To confess...” Carlotta maintained her composure even with the blade in front of her eyes. Calm as ever, she continued, “I just wanted to see you panic with none of your allies here in the city.”

Mädchen clucked her tongue, pushing her sword forward a precise three centimeters. She was confident this woman wouldn’t make a sound even if one of her eyeballs was gouged out.



However...

A second later, Mädchen was writhing, pain shooting through her arm. She clapped a hand over her mouth to suppress the yelp she almost let out and leapt back from the bed. She hadn't dropped her sword, but her grip had loosened, so she probably wouldn't be able to use it anymore. A hot pain was seeping out of her upper arm. And she was sure that it wasn't only pain—she was bleeding as well.

Tumbling down from the bed and hitting the floor, she pressed her hand to the spot that was in pain. A lukewarm fluid was spilling out from her. The wound was deep.

A hopeless paralysis was beginning to set in. Mädchen resisted it with all her might, raising her head. She pierced Carlotta with a vicious glare.

Though the target of her ire seemed to barely even notice.

"You don't know a single one of my tricks, do you?" A leg stuck up out of the sheets at almost an impossible angle. Carlotta Mausen's leg—so pale as to be ethereal, as if a sculpture made of ice—a thin knife pinched between two toes. "You really couldn't guess that I might have a knife hidden in my bed?"

"Kh...!" Mädchen spat, somehow managing to remain clutching her sword as she stood. She could hear several people's footsteps pattering down the hall. If her voice hadn't, then the sound of her falling to the floor had surely echoed all the way through this vast mansion.

"Poor little Mädchen..." Carlotta said, with a sigh even, putting her leg back under the sheets. "Looks like you're finally all alone in this town. Do you think you can beat Quo all by your lonesome?"

The knife had moved from her foot to her hand at some point. She flicked it into the air and caught it, then slid out of the bed and looked down at Mädchen. "...This is the only weapon I have in this room. Just this little tiny knife. I don't know if you still have the strength to swing that longsword around, but it's not much to defend myself with, is it?" She glanced at the door to the spacious room, a clear indication of the sound of the servants running through the halls.

She paused for a moment, shrugging her shoulders, then continued, “Now’s your only chance to flee.”

...She’s letting me get away... Mädchen was sure of that. She couldn’t kill an Instructor here—in her own home, her bedroom no less. *I’m not gonna die here just to harass her.* The thought was sweet temptation, reinforced by the fact that it was simply the easiest option.

Mädchen bit her lip, shaking her head. “I’ll kill you one day...” she groaned.

Carlotta’s only response was to smile. She headed to the white table next to her bed, still holding the knife, and picked up a pitcher of water and the glass next to it. “If you’re going to kill someone, I’d really prefer it be Quo.” Her tone made it hard to tell whether she was serious or joking... as usual.

Mädchen dragged herself to the window as fast as she could.

There was a light rap on the door. “Is anything amiss, Mistress?” The voice of an aged man.

Mädchen clambered up onto the window sill, grinding her teeth, biting her lip and tongue. She tumbled out into the rain and wind, flinging aside the curtains that clung to her. She heard glass breaking behind her, and Carlotta’s voice.

“Townie! I broke a glass and cut my finger. There’s blood on the sheets and carpet, so go fetch someone who can remove stains—” The wind and rain drowned anything after that out.

Mädchen fled, fighting off the pain of her wound and the warmth that was escaping her body as she did, into the dark night. Dawn was still far off.



She hadn’t forgotten.

Knowing that, her voice sounded all the more cold to him. Isterviva’s voice, her words like a judge proclaiming a sentence.

“I shall tell you what the reality is. You were a failure.” Her smile never faltered, her self-deprecation impenetrably thick. “The failed result of what should have been our most powerful magic. A failure that would be of no use to us. A failure that would have been impossible had our founder had more

strength. A failure resulting from *our* failure to oppose the gods. The aim of that magic...”

She hesitated there. It wasn't that she was unable to speak. He was watching her so fiercely that he would let nothing escape him. Then he noticed. She was clenching her teeth so hard she might break them.

“Our aim was...” Her voice was thick with agony now. “To stop the destruction...”

“By sacrificing us?”

Chapter III: “Sacrificing?”

Kimluck—a city in the north of the continent, and the capital of the church. It was raining there.

Drops of water fell ceaselessly from a dark sky. Looking up inside the downpour caused the trails of the raindrops to form a pattern of lines radiating outward. The night inside the city was dark. And in that dark sky, the rain carved countless grey lines.

She stood alone in the dark, letting the cold drops pelt her.

A night path was laid out before her. Perhaps the path led to the dawn, but even if that awaited in the end, it was nowhere in sight now. She longed for the distant destination, but also felt like if it came too quickly, it'd be a waste.

Due to the curfew that had been imposed the previous day, there was no one in the streets. Of course, it was unlikely there would be anyone odd enough to be out in this rain anyway. The neverending stream of sand blowing through the city mixed with the rain to cover every single building, every single street with mud.

I've seen some truly powerful things... she found herself thinking as she looked up at the rain pounding down on the streets. *My mentor was one of the most powerful black sorcerers on the continent, and now the same could be said of me. I've seen the magic of dragons, which is on an entirely different level, too. But...* Her lips curled into a sardonic smile.

The darkened town seemed to extend out forever around her. A town of stone, with nothing, no people, outside of the sound of the rain. The buildings stood proudly, their roofs looking down over the city, unconcerned by the rain's relentless assault.

The central cathedral district of the city was completely unlike the slums on the outer ring, and reminded her of her own city. The city of sorcerers, Tefurem. The buildings here were magnificent, well-ordered, enough to

compete with her hometown. The city was quiet now, motionless. But no matter how much power she possessed—even if she could mow down all the buildings that stood before her right now—she would never be able to fully destroy “this city.”

If she could, then people would go mad.

I suppose that's the ultimate power... Compared to that, any other “power” was outshone.

She began to walk through the rain. It was past midnight, though she couldn't tell the exact time, since she couldn't see the moon.

She was clad in black battle gear, a long sword hanging from one hand as she walked at a measured pace. The sword was sheathed in a simple black leather scabbard. It was considerably longer than a standard sword, almost like something to be wielded on horseback. There was ornamentation on the sword, like it was a display piece. The thing that stood out most about it was the moon and beast crest on its hilt.

She herself was tall, but the sword was almost longer than her height. The blade alone was over 100 centimeters.

Rain dripped down and fell from the black hair clinging to her face. She pushed the hair aside and frowned. No, it was more like she was trying to erase the emotion from her face. All her thoughts now seemed like unnecessary sentimentality.

Far in the distance on the path she walked, a black building jutted out, taller than all those around it. An enormous cathedral, dreary and unadorned, like a gravestone. It was Yggdrasil Cathedral, the true heart of the Kimluck Church.

The stuff of myths from the distant past, and that would extend into the distant future as well. The legend went that the three sister goddesses that the Kimluck faithful worshiped, the Weird Sisters, lived in the land of the gods, called Yggdrasil. The birth of all life occurred there, and the three spun their threads of fate, casting them out into the world. There were also some who called them witches, though they did so quietly here where the Kimluck faith was strong.

Three goddesses who govern fate. Or witches.

The land of the gods, the World Tree Yggdrasil.

Rain pelted the cathedral that shared its name.

Nothing needs a history so grand as to be legend. But on this continent, that cathedral had bathed in a near-infinite amount of rain over the long centuries. All throughout the many births and deaths of history, every single person who'd ever lived in this city had gazed up at this cathedral.

Even those who hadn't lived in this city might have imagined the sight of it.

She—Azalie—stopped walking once more. She'd done this over and over again since steeling her resolve and leaving her hideout.

Looking down at her boots and how they parted the stream of muddy water flowing at her feet, she thought to herself, *In the end, I might just be trying to stand up to that incredible power...*

But she knew of one person in the past who had done the same thing she now did. *He was here, ten years ago. I'm sure of it...* She knew it was likely just her imagination, but she felt sure of it. *Master Childman Powderfield... No, Stabber Childman took these streets and headed for that cathedral. I can tell...*

She raised her head. The cathedral was, of course, still there, a proud black shadow against the night sky.

She had to go. She had an unshakeable feeling that if she didn't, she'd never be able to understand her mentor.

So she walked forward. She would not stop again. The night would end eventually, and she would surely arrive at her destination.

If I can just understand... she thought, not giving the words voice. *...would you forgive me, Master...?*

The Chaos Witch used all her might to hold her lips pressed into a thin line. She was sure that if she didn't, she wouldn't be able to stop herself from crying.



“What is this?!” Those were all the words Orphen could muster amid the foul

smell he could hardly breathe through.

The mountain of human bones was piled up high, and the severe odor was evidence that it wasn't just bones in the heap. Here and there, he could see corpses that still maintained a largely human form decomposing. The corpses came in every variety. Man, woman, old, young.

He remained calm and observed the pile, realizing that it wasn't composed entirely of bodies. More accurately, it was a pile of rubble on top of which human remains had been discarded.

Nausea and fear. The sensations were similar, but they combined and compounded on each other to form a truly sickening sensation.

"I-Is this a tomb?" Majic asked, eyes spinning—literally rolling around in his head.

Orphen squinted and answered, "I'd think if it were, it'd be a lot more... I don't know, respectful. Dignified." He looked down at his feet and groaned, noticing something white like lime mixing in with the yellow sand. If some of the bones had worn down to dust at this point, then there were bodies that were incredibly old among the heap.

And most of the bones he could see on the ground had been smashed or broken in some way.

"...Looks like they were all dumped here through there," he muttered, looking upward at the rift in the ceiling of the tunnel, far above them. When he focused his attention there, he noticed an opening separate from the rift, a square hole that looked manmade.

"Maybe it's like some sort of garbage chute for corpse removal."

"...I don't think you're supposed to throw bodies away like they're garbage..." Majic whimpered, voice nasal-sounding due to his pinched nose.

Well, I don't know what to tell you. Orphen didn't want to breathe, so he replied in his head and looked Claiomh's way. She—or rather, Leki—was climbing slowly up the mountain. True, if you climbed up the slope of the wall, you could probably make it to the hole in the ceiling... but that was apparently not his idea. Suddenly, and with no warning, Leki looked up at the ceiling, and

he and Claiomh vanished.

“He teleported!” Orphen cursed, scrambling over to the spot where Claiomh had been standing. Since Deep Dragons used their gaze as a medium for their magic, they could only have teleported to somewhere that the caster could see. Though since Leki could apparently see in the dark, his vision might have other differences from a human’s.

In any case, Orphen stood on top of the mound—forcing himself not to think about what the soft, squishy thing he’d stepped on amid all the rubble and bones was—and looked up at the hole in the ceiling.

The hole was in one corner of the ceiling, but not all the way at the wall. It was some four or five meters from it, and he wasn’t sure, but it looked like it was at a slant instead of being completely vertical. He could see a shape blocking the bit of light coming through from the hole that must have been Claiomh. Leki had teleported the two of them to the opening of the hole.

“Wh-What do we do...?” Majic asked, climbing up after Orphen.

“What do you think...?” Orphen groaned, running a hand through his hair. The smell was making his headache worse and worse and he was starting to get dizzy. For a moment, he was seized by the urge to just give up before he mustered up the strength to say, “All we can do is... climb up the rubble there... Not that I’m looking forward to it...” He pointed reluctantly at the collapsed wall.

The tunnels were collapsed here like some great landslide had once occurred. If you thought of them as tubes, it was like one of those tubes had been snapped in half, the top of it crumbling down onto the bottom. That was likely what had piled up all the rubble around them. He didn’t know what had caused it, but the fissures were slanted in just the right way to be scalable. And the closest foothold was in just the right position for him to jump to it from the pile of rubble on which he currently stood.

The hole in the ceiling also seemed to have widened the fissure in the tunnel, so if he climbed the wall next to him, he should be able to reach it, however...

“I don’t think we can get into the hole without climbing like five meters over on the ceiling...” Majic was muttering nearby.

His pupil's supposition was accurate and correct, but Orphen just could not bring himself to commend the boy.

The hole *was* a little bit towards the center of the ceiling and not right up next to the wall. So, as Majic had said, they likely wouldn't be able to enter it unless they could climb along the ceiling like spiders.

...At that distance... could I neutralize gravity and float my way there? he asked himself, crossing his arms when he couldn't give himself an immediate answer.

In the end, there was only one thing he could say. "Well, let's go."

"...Do you have some sort of strategy?" Majic asked expectantly.

Orphen sighed and shook his head. "Nope. But the closer we get to the ceiling—" He gestured around him, already walking toward the wall. "—the farther we get from all this."

"...I suppose that's true," Majic agreed, fearfully eyeing his surroundings, the skeletons and corpses strewn about around them.

They began to climb the steep, fractured wall.

They got a good ten meters off of the ground, though the going was tougher than they expected. This high up, the stench of the bodies was a lot more bearable, but it had become much easier to see them all at their current height. It was just nauseating them in a different way, seeing the mountain of corpses illuminated by the light coming in from the hole in the ceiling.

"S... Somehow or another..." Orphen arrived near the ceiling, stepping onto the last foothold. He wiped the sweat from his chin, panting. "We made it..."

"But what do we do from here...?" Majic asked coolly.

Orphen looked down wearily. "...It's too dangerous to jump." Obviously, the drop from here would be the same distance they'd just climbed up. Thinking about how it would probably take about a second and change to fall the distance they'd just expended so much energy climbing was enough to make him rather dejected. He noted, looking down at the bodies below, that he'd

have plenty of company, though the thought didn't provide much solace.

Gravity nullification was a difficult spell to control. And it wouldn't just be for an instant. He'd have to travel some five meters out to the hole. He didn't think his chance of success was *low* necessarily, but it would be difficult to pull off for sure. And teleportation was out of the question.

Can I do it...? For the time being, Orphen at least tried to compose the gravity nullification spell. However, the complex sorcery fell apart immediately. He couldn't concentrate because of his headache. "My wounds should be healed, though..."

It was like he'd gotten a concussion, and the after-effects were lingering longer than he'd like. He cursed and looked Majic's way, opening his mouth to speak but then sighing instead.

"What is it, Master?" Majic asked.

Orphen waved a hand weakly. "...I was wondering if you might be able to do it, but it was stupid of me to even think it." He bit one of his nails, desperately trying to think of another way. The conversation was over, or so he thought, but his pupil responded in a way he hadn't been anticipating.

"It's not *stupid*..." Majic huffed. "I can try."

"Listen," Orphen said, shoulders falling. He muttered, exasperated, "You can insist all you want, but this isn't something you can pull off with simple motivation. I'll admit you have considerable latent sorcerous abilities. But composing complex spells and maintaining control over such sorcery is simply something you can only master through training. I'm not saying you're incapable, just that you're inexperienced. With time, you'll be able to master all this, so—" *there's no need to rush it*, Orphen was going to finish, but he stopped when he saw that Majic wasn't looking at him anymore.

The boy had both hands at his chest—though they weren't touching—and he was staring intently at the space between them. There was nothing there save for a... presence that was forming.

Then he saw it. Layers and layers of a vast magical composition forming around Majic's body. A single composition, vast and complex, but also simple in

a way.

“Hey—” Orphen shouted, shuddering. “Don’t do it!”

Majic didn’t move. Either he was concentrating too hard to hear Orphen’s command, or he ignored it for some other reason.

Orphen hurriedly reached out to grab him, and in that moment—

“I bound across thee—” Majic’s voice rang out. “—Snowcapped Mountain!”
The spell activated.

I was too late...! Orphen clenched his teeth, prepared for the worst. His senses disappeared.

In the next instant, the two of them were floating through the air. They slowly separated from the wall they’d been clinging to and proceeded out into empty air.

Orphen looked down, breaking out into a cold sweat as he floated, helpless, through the air. There was nothing his limbs could hold onto, so there was nothing he could do to control his movement. Majic was just next to him, still in the same pose as before, concentrating on controlling his spell.

Orphen just watched him in amazement. Honestly, Majic was doing a great job. He had to admit it. He had completed the complex spell and was maintaining it. It was difficult to concentrate in complete weightlessness, where your senses are confused by the lack of gravity. As Orphen watched, he could see Majic start to tremble, his eyes becoming bloodshot. He groaned. Maintaining the spell was clearly taking a physical toll on him.

Eventually, they both reached the hole in the ceiling. It was a diagonal tunnel, like a garbage chute, as Orphen had remarked earlier. It was about two meters wide each way—big enough that you could toss corpses down it and they would likely not get stuck. It was a pretty steep incline, but the walls were rugged enough to seem climbable.

That’s when the weight returned to him.

“?!” Orphen reached out quickly, scrambling to hold onto the nearest bumps in the wall. Even as his legs slid along the walls, he somehow managed to find

purchase, grabbing Majic with one hand.

The boy was about to fall. Either casting the spell had completely exhausted him, or maybe he just didn't have much energy to spare in the first place with how fatigued he must have been at this point.

Orphen grabbed at the collar of his cloak with his fingers, trying to get a grip on him. A sharp pain shot through the hand he was using to grip the wall—he must have torn off two or three fingernails. Shivering at the thought of the blood causing his fingers to slip, he tried to relax his knees to maintain his balance.

When he'd managed to hold that position for a few seconds, Orphen slowly tensed both of his arms.

Majic was limp, looking downwards. Orphen slowly pulled the slightly trembling boy upward and yelled, "You... IDIOT! What were you thinking?!"

"Ugh..." Majic just groaned without looking his way. "But... it worked... right?"

"You numbskull!" Orphen yelled again as Majic looked down at the floor over ten meters below them. Majic's shoulders were slumped pathetically, like he had absolutely no energy left. Orphen strained with all his might to hold the boy's limp body up with just one arm. He got a better grip on the bumps on the wall and pushed against it with his body to stand himself up.

It looked like Majic was trying to push his own arms against the wall as well, but he seemed unable to move except to tremble slightly.

Seeing that, Orphen muttered, "You can't move, can you?"

Majic didn't answer.



Orphen felt his face twitching. Annoyed at the stern look it was forming, he asked, “Let me guess: this happens just about every time you use your sorcery?”

“When I use big spells... it exhausts me. But it doesn’t happen when I manage to control it perfectly... Isn’t that only natural?”

“Why didn’t you say anything to me about this?!” Orphen spat, also cursing himself for never asking about it. It was something he should have taught the boy, but he hadn’t realized—he hardly ever failed to control his spells, so it just hadn’t occurred to him.

“You don’t know how dangerous that is.”

“But isn’t it obvi—”

“Don’t act like you know what you’re talking about!” he scolded his student. He could feel Majic flinch. The boy looked up at him blankly, having no idea what he was being yelled at for.

Orphen wanted to put his head in his hands, but he didn’t have enough arms for that. Not enough arms to hit the boy either. Clucking his tongue, he continued, “You’ve never thought about it before? You don’t get exhausted when you succeed in controlling it, right? But whether or not you control the spell well shouldn’t affect your level of exhaustion afterward. It doesn’t! When you fail in your control and you get so exhausted that you can’t move afterward, you should feel the same then as when you succeed!”

Majic blinked. Orphen couldn’t tell if he understood what he was being told or not.

His voice trembled as he went on. “So why do you get exhausted sometimes but not others? Well, you’re not exhausted. What you are is drained.” He held on to Majic’s collar even tighter. “That’s because sorcery operates outside of the laws of physics! But it still affects physical phenomena. Do you understand what that means? Sorcery is only sorcery when it’s properly controlled. It can only function when it’s being controlled. Take that control away and it returns to simple physics. It obeys the laws again. And what do you think is the first thing that comes back into play? Reactions. That’s why the death rate is so high

for apprentice sorcerers!”

Orphen glared at Majic as the boy averted his eyes timidly. “You’re only just barely controlling your spells. And the reactions you’re allowing to happen are affecting you, too! Listen to me—if your control were just slightly worse on that spell, you would have *died!*”

He should have told him this. *I should have told him from the very beginning! Dammit!* He continued to glare, and Majic continued to avert his eyes. He could feel his pulse in his temples. That sensation mixed with his headache to produce a strange pain in the back of his head.

And, all too suddenly, Majic made eye contact with him. “But... you couldn’t do anything, Master!”

“...Huh?” was all Orphen could say, unable to comprehend what had been said to him.

Taking that as his opportunity to continue, Majic squeezed Orphen’s hand around his collar. “You couldn’t do anything, so I had to! So you have no right to yell at me!”

“You’re—” But before Orphen could say anything, Majic shook his hand off.

He almost lost his balance for a moment, but managed to find something to hold on to and clung to the wall. He wasn’t exactly intimidating, but still, his eyes were serious as he stared back at his mentor. “It’s like...”

The boy hesitated there for a moment. But his throat moved as if he were swallowing something, and he said in a quiet voice, “It’s like you’re jealous of me, Master.”

A blood vessel throbbed in his head. Orphen shuddered as his headache reached a fever pitch, then...

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Claiomh’s scream resounded from the top of the shaft.

“?!”

The voice was close by—Orphen looked up the slope and let go of Majic. He put his hands on the wall and started to climb.

He didn’t turn back to check, but he could tell that Majic was climbing up

after him. He hurried as much as he could while still being careful not to slip.

The shaft itself didn't go on for too long. It was only maybe three meters. It wasn't the easiest climb, but Orphen made it to the top in a little more than a minute.

Orphen stuck his head out of the hole. The hole to throw bodies into. At an incline, so that they rolled.

He found himself in a hallway. He was starting to think he wasn't wrong about the shaft being a garbage chute. The hole was perpendicular to the hallway. So corpses could be brought to this passageway and dumped down the chute. They fell down into the underground tunnels and rotted there, in what little light filtered down through this hole.

Of course, no one would ever dump bodies down a garbage chute. "No..." Getting out into the hallway, Orphen bit his lip. *Maybe they would...*

He looked down the hall in both directions, Majic sticking his face out of the hole uncomfortably after him. He was still avoiding eye contact after their earlier confrontation.

Such things didn't concern Orphen right now, though. He put a hand to his forehead and groaned. "This may be the worst possible situation."

The hallway was a dungeon.

There were heavy, rust-stained doors all down the hall. Every wall was made of solid stone, lit only by torches that burned at regular intervals. The dank, stifling air and all-too-quiet shadows just screamed "dungeon." He couldn't sense anyone beyond the thick stone walls. Instead, he just knew somehow that he would find heavy earth behind them.

The sand in the air was even thicker than it had been in the tunnels. There was so much of it that it was hard to see through.

The stench of rotting flesh was still heavy here. Orphen clenched his fists, sharpening his senses.

"We're in a dungeon. So that hole must be for throwing away dead prisoners." Orphen glanced once more at the opening they'd come through,

then looked down the hall.

It wasn't very wide. Certainly much narrower than the underground tunnels, but this was more normal, wasn't it? You can't make underground spaces all that big. Especially if the buildings built on top of them weren't that big. And if there wasn't anything above them, then there was no reason to build an underground facility in the first place, so there must have been something above them.

The hallway was pretty long. There were doors on both walls in an alternating pattern all the way down it. The doors had small windows so one could look inside, and gaps at the bottom to send food inside. But, with the rotten smell all around him, he couldn't say he much wanted to peer inside any of them.

"...What's the worst possible situation?" Majic asked quietly, still not making eye contact.

Orphen shrugged. "This is a dungeon. You know what that means, right? Obviously, the exit's gonna be guarded so that the prisoners don't escape. And if they're guards of this city, they're not going to be very friendly to us."

"Well, there's the two of us, and if Claiomh recovers, then we've got Leki's magic, too. If we fight, I'm sure—"

Orphen sent a glare at the whispering Majic. When the latter shut his mouth, the former told him, "Don't you dare use your sorcery again. You got it?"

"...Is this really the time for that? With the situation we're in, I'd say anything we can use as a weapon is—"

"I'm not using a double-edged sword no matter what the situation is. Until you're able to fully control your sorcery—however many years that takes—your magic is off limits. I don't even want you composing spells in your head. And that's an order."

"But—" Majic protested, meeting Orphen's eyes for the first time.

Orphen shook his head decisively. "Disobey me and you're expelled. I'm not gonna teach a student who doesn't listen to his master."

"That's tyranny! Master, you—" Majic paused for a second, then seemed to

make up his mind and continued, “You ignored everyone who tried to stop you when you left the Tower of Fangs, didn’t you, Master? I heard from Forte.”

“That’s got nothing to do with this,” Orphen spat, grinding his teeth. “And we don’t have time to argue anyway. We have to find Claiomh.”

He looked left and right again. Finding one door that was open a ways away from them, Orphen squinted, focusing his eyes on it. All the doors in the hallway were the same shape, but just this one had been warped enough to open it. Like it had been wrenched open, but not the lock, the door itself.

“There,” Orphen whispered, heading towards it after signaling Majic. It was a long hallway, but not longer than 20 meters, considering it was underground. At the far end of it, there were stairs that likely led aboveground, and just before them, two layers of iron bars, one vertical and one horizontal, to block off the hallway.

For the time being, Orphen made his way to the open door, taking some solace in the fact that he hadn’t seen any signs of a jailer nearby. They were probably stationed at the top of the stairs. Any sounds echoed down here, making even whispered words seem risky to him, but there were screams and groans from behind the doors every so often, so Claiomh’s earlier scream probably hadn’t stood out much.

There was no way to silence his footsteps on the stone floor, so Orphen decided not to worry about that and ran over to the door. The slab of thick iron was like a piece of steak you might be able to get at a fancy butcher’s shop, but it was twisted and snapped in two like it hadn’t taken any effort to do so. Nothing other than Leki’s magic could do this—Orphen was sure of that as he peered through the doorway.

He could see swaying blonde hair inside the cell. Claiomh stood there, her back to him and Leki on her head. She seemed safe enough at the moment. And since she’d screamed, she must have regained consciousness and been released from Leki’s mental control.

Orphen called out to her, relieved. “Claiomh, you al—”

Her blonde head whipped around and Orphen flinched, momentarily overcome with apprehension, like she might turn around somehow changed—

but she didn't look particularly different than usual when she faced him. A little dirty, maybe, and shocked, but that was it.

...*Shocked?* That confused Orphen somewhat. Sure, she would be surprised to regain consciousness in a place like this, but not to that level... There wasn't much difference between this underground jail and the tunnels they'd been in earlier, but Claiomh's mouth was flapping open and shut, arms waving wildly.

"This is bad, Orphen!" She ran over to him and took his hands, waving them around, her face flushed. "I got swept away by all this water, and then all of a sudden I ended up here, and it was kind of like I was dreaming, but actually now that I think about it, maybe this is the bad dream, 'cause it's a jail! I hate jails!"

"...Yeah, I don't think there's many people who like them."

Claiomh nodded emphatically at Orphen's muttered response, then started to smack Leki on top of her head. The black baby dragon looked annoyed and tried to escape, but there was nowhere for him to flee to on top of the blonde's small head.

"But you know, I kind of get the sense that this one brought me here. I sort of feel like I was dreaming, and someone was holding my hand and pulling me behind them. And like maybe if we got to where we were going, there'd be someone we knew there who could help us. But it's bad!" she yelled, voice as shrill as always.

Getting nervous, Orphen stole a look out into the hallway, but he couldn't sense any jailers coming their way. And Majic seemed to be keeping a lookout, too.

"What's bad?" Orphen raised his eyebrows, wondering how things could possibly get worse for them. "Spit it out already. Not that I want to hear it."

"I think you should, though. I mean, you'll probably notice soon anyway—" She indicated something behind her, pointing with her short arm to the back of the cell.

Orphen looked there and blinked, confused. In the darkness in the back of the cell, there was a ragged bed sheet stained with he didn't even want to know what. But that was it. There was nothing else.

“Huh?” Claiomh sounded just as confused even as she kept pointing. “That’s strange. Someone was just dead there a minute ago.” She said something frightening so easily.

She doesn’t even know what she’s saying, does she...? Orphen thought to himself. He didn’t say anything aloud though, since he didn’t want to get in trouble for it. There were torches in the hallway, but there was no illumination inside the cell, and no windows, of course, either. Orphen sighed, glad that the darkness would hide his expression.

“A corpse?” he asked.

Claiomh nodded so emphatically she almost dropped Leki. “Yes. It was lying right there!”

“Lying...”

“I was just sleeping.”

Orphen leapt, feeling something icy on his neck. He didn’t leap in a direction, just jumped in place, pushing Claiomh down and getting into a fighting stance reflexively. He turned around to find a man standing behind him. A familiar one, too.

He’d snuck up behind him and put his hand on Orphen’s neck. The man was standing there with a peevish smile on his face, his right hand still raised. He was a young man, thin and lanky. He stood at a slant, watching Orphen and ready to respond to whatever move he made.

Fishing the man’s name from the brink of oblivion, Orphen whispered it quickly: “Salua?”

“...Yeah. So you’ve finally... come. Successor of—”

“Don’t call me that!” Orphen yelled without thinking, lunging at Salua. He reached out and grabbed the robes Salua was wearing, feeling a strange, sticky sensation.

...Sticky...? His hand twitched at the feeling. It was cold, but lukewarm at the same time, and gave off the same smell as the rotten stench filling the jail.

“Well, that’s how it is...” Salua shook off Orphen’s hand weakly and smirked,

bloodstained teeth showing faintly through his lips. “It’s only natural blondie there mistook me for a corpse.”



“You...” Orphen took a step back, speechless. He bumped into Claiomh, but didn’t worry about that.

Salua was covered in wounds. In fact, you could say that actually having all his limbs still attached was the only thing he still had going for him. His robes were white, but they were stained black in places with blood. His left shoulder hung unnaturally low, likely dislocated. He was standing on two feet, but his balance was clearly off. One of his ankles might have been broken. And, putting his hand where Salua had touched him earlier, Orphen grimaced—it came away wet with blood. There wasn’t a single nail left on the fingers Salua had touched him with.

“Orphen...” Claiomh spoke up, tugging on Orphen’s sleeve from behind him. “Do you know him? I kind of feel like I’ve seen him somewhere before, but...”

Salua cocked his head at that.

Orphen looked down at the girl, squinting. “Come to think of it, you just got attacked from behind by this guy. You might not remember, but...”

“That explains it. You get attacked from behind by people you don’t know a lot.”

“...I almost got killed by this kid...?” Salua groaned, head in ragged hand, like he was truly hurt by that. His left hand, however, remained at his side, like Orphen expected it would.

Orphen gave Claiomh a pat on the head and, since she really didn’t seem to remember, explained, “He’s the assassin who was in the village in Fenrir’s Forest. Salua Solude, a Death Instructor of Kimluck... right?”

“So you don’t like people saying your own name, but you’ll blab about me, eh?” the Death Instructor said sardonically, stroking the stubble starting to appear on his chin. “Well, no use worrying about getting caught. As you can see, I’m already half dead.”

“And a corpse nobody remembers is just a ghost, right?” Claiomh pointed out cheerfully.

Salua responded wearily. “...That’s a pretty good point. Smart kid.”

“Orphen, you don’t think he’s making fun of me, do you?”

“Some things you’re better off not knowing.” Orphen ended that conversation and looked around the cell. He only had to turn slightly to see the whole room. He didn’t see any tableware or signs that the chamber pot in the corner of the room had been used. Which meant...

“Doesn’t look like you’ve been here for long.”

“Two days might not seem like a long time, but it’s a different story in a cell like this. Get interrogated by the regulars here and—well, I think it’s self-evident—what *should* come out won’t even do that anymore.”

Orphen huffed, having no desire to laugh at Salua’s groaning. “Can’t say I’d like to see for myself. Seeing that mountain of bones through the chute was enough, personally.”

Majic suddenly leapt inside the cell and pointed down the hallway. “A guard’s coming!”

“Guess we made a bit too much noise,” Salua griped. Listening to the regular footfalls as someone descended the stairs, he went on, “I hate hearing those footsteps. Least the guys here could do is skip their way along or something every once in a while.”

“Shut up,” Orphen said coldly, shooting a sour look at the broken door lying out in the hallway. They didn’t have time to drag it into the cell with them, and either way, there was no chance of the cell escaping the guard’s notice with its door missing.

Orphen snapped at Claiomh, or rather, Leki, “You know, one of these days, you’re gonna have to figure out how to unlock things.”

“If you can open the door when it’s locked, isn’t it more effort to go to the trouble of unlocking it and then opening it?” Claiomh asked with pursed lips.

Orphen had nothing to say to her dead serious question.

The footsteps were closer now; they seemed to have finished descending the stairs. They could hear a young-sounding voice from down the hall. “...What the...? An escape? How did the door—” That’s where the guard became speechless. A reasonable reaction upon seeing an iron door three centimeters thick crumpled up like it was a scrap of paper.

“There’s always two of them at a time,” Salua advised quietly, a slight smile on his face. “You’ll want to take them each out in one hit. They won’t notice a bit of noise up top. They don’t hear the screaming prisoners, after all.”

“Up top?” Claiomh asked, holding Leki at her chest and patting some of the yellow sand out of his black fur. She looked up at the boys blankly and asked, “Come to think of it, where are we? We’re still underground, right?”

“Right. What, you weren’t trying to get here?” Salua looked exasperated, but Orphen didn’t have a clue where they were either.

There was a heavy clanking from the hallway—the sound of the guards opening the iron gates. It took a while, and they could hear the guards cursing. Maybe the keys were rusted.

Pressing himself to the wall near the door to the cell, Orphen clenched his fists. He had no idea how much noise Salua considered to be “a bit,” but he wasn’t confident he could take out two potentially armed guards with his bare hands. Even if he thought he could do it in better circumstances, right now, he was exhausted. He quieted the parts of his mind he didn’t need for sorcery and focused on forming a spell.

But he kept enough concentration to carry on their conversation as well, muttering, “We got lost underground. We were set up by one of your friends—called himself Name. Then that furball with a tail led us here. I’m guessing he was just following the scent of people or something.”

Salua said nothing in response. Maybe he was just too tired to do so.

Majic had taken up position at the front of the cell, protecting Claiomh behind him. Orphen was relieved to sense that the boy wasn’t trying to cast any sorcery. His lecture may have fouled the boy’s mood, but he seemed to have taken it to heart at least.

His brain seemed to be rattling around in his head from the pain he still felt. It wasn’t intense anymore, but a stinging ache. Orphen wet his lips, a cold sweat breaking out on his brow. He could taste the bitter sand on his dry lips. The dead sand that covered the whole region around Kimluck.

The gates were open now. The creaking of their hinges irritated him. As

Orphen tensed his whole body, Salua whispered to him:

“These are the dungeons underneath the Yggdrasil Cathedral—an even lower level than the Poet’s Chamber, which most people don’t even know about.”

Two priest soldiers hurried down the hall and appeared at the entrance to the cell. The phrase came to mind as he’d heard it the day before from Name Only, but Orphen had no idea what sort of role “priest soldiers” fulfilled in the first place. They wore white robes like priests. In fact, what they wore was the exact same thing Salua had on. It was a heavy fabric that brought armor to mind, with a tight design. Their hoods had ample fabric, and while they didn’t completely hide their faces, they wore fabric on the bottom half of their faces like masks.

There were two of them, just as Salua had warned. Focused on the batons they held in their hands, Orphen tried to pour magic into the spells he’d composed, but—*sting!*—a harsh, metallic sound pierced his head, his vision going black. Pain blossomed in the back of his throat, encroaching up into his brain from there. The pain’s incursion completely stole his freedom from him.

“Aaaaaah?!” Orphen screamed, clutching at his body. *I knew it! I knew it!* As he screamed, his vision recovered partially. He could barely see something thin and long flying at him in his darkened twilight vision.

In the next second, the baton impacted and Orphen flew into the wall. He felt no pain from being struck, his nerves already frayed, but the shock of the impact stung somewhat. The blow that was like an explosion had come from the baton, and then the impact to the back of his head was from the wall of the cell. That was the heavier, harder hit. Orphen could do nothing but submit to the impacts, like a stuffed animal being swung around by a rowdy child.

Eventually, his eyes focused on the ceiling. He’d fallen to the floor.

“Orphen?!”

“Master!”

He could hear Claiomh and Majic from somewhere far away. They couldn’t have been even two meters away from him in the small cell, but Orphen felt like he’d traveled a much farther distance away from them. He wanted to pass out, but unable to even do that, he merely continued to groan wordlessly, repeating

the same agonized cry.

I knew it... I knew it... Phlegm stuck in his throat, making it hard for him to breathe. He tried to rely on all his senses, not just his useless vision, to take stock of the situation. Salua had somehow managed to grab a baton from one of the guards and knock him out, even with his mangled body. Claiomh and Majic had surrounded the other one and were doing something to him (he couldn't see, but he got the feeling it was particularly vicious in Claiomh's case).

He still couldn't see... His vision was blurry. *With tears...* he realized with some surprise. He almost burst out laughing at the absurdity of it.

He could see a little better after wiping his eyes with a trembling hand. The two priest soldiers had already been defeated and a rather excited Claiomh was tying them up with some rope. It was the rope Majic had been using to drag Orphen behind him earlier, which he must have picked up from the priest soldiers who'd followed them into the tunnels. None of that mattered, though.

"Master...?" Majic came over to him nervously.

Salua was standing next to the priest soldiers and didn't appear to be able to move, though he could at least send a look over at Orphen. Orphen, however, couldn't return his gaze. He couldn't return either of their gazes.

He used the hand he'd wiped his tears with and pointed it to the ceiling, opening it wide. He slowly composed a simple spell. One that anyone could activate, sorcery so easy it almost wounded his pride to perform it.

He shook his head. Before he knew it, the spell had warped into something entirely different than what he'd been intending to cast. It scattered, meaningless. Even the individual sections of it weren't formed properly. If it were a sentence, its letters wouldn't even be written right. No matter how he tried to fix the crumbling composition, it just spilled away from him, nonsense. Like it was melting away in water.

Orphen groaned, in a daze. He could hear his voice breaking.

"It's no good... I'm... I'm done for..." The pain in his head intensified, like distant thunder pealing endlessly into the horizon. A persistent pain that would chase after him no matter how far he ran. He groaned again, coughing up

phlegm.

“I can’t use sorcery anymore!” he screamed.

A heavy silence descended on them. Even Claiomh’s cheerful humming ceased in an instant. “...Huh?” she exclaimed somewhat blankly.

Orphen brought his open hand to his forehead, feeling the sticky sensation of the blood and sand from where the baton had hit him. All he could do was stare back at Claiomh’s astonished face in silence.



“Sacrificing?” Her voice was hard and rough, like a scab. “You were a failure. We could not even use you as sacrifices,” she stated plainly. Then she suddenly hung her head, deflated. “...Do not make me repeat myself. I grow weary.”

“Are you not used to disappointment by now?” He hadn’t meant anything in particular by the words, but was taken aback by the effect they seemed to have on her. While she had looked listless before, there was always a hint of her power showing through, but there were clear cracks in her beautiful facade now. She might have even been trembling.

Istersiva quietly raised her face, her green eyes swimming. “...It’s true. Ever since that day, we have lived with despair as our constant companion. However...” She stood tall now, resolute. “Do not look down on us! We have fought, all this time! Never once averting our eyes. Could you—” She closed her eyes as if enduring some pain. Her hair swayed as she trembled. “Could you do the same thing? ...We do not know.”

“That’s why you did not tell us the truth?” he asked, toying with the blade in his hand.

Istersiva let out a quiet huff of a laugh. “It is not the truth. It is *reality*.” She insisted on the distinction. “...It’s just the reality of what occurred. That is all. We are not so arrogant as to assign meaning to it.”

“Maybe it’s more fitting to say you were cowardly.” Again, he didn’t mean anything by the comment, but this time, she didn’t show her expression to him, merely nodding.

“You’re right.” The voice of this woman, who had lived hundreds of years, was as cold as ice. “We were cowards. In the face of our destruction, this much is true. However, do you have any right to say that to us? When you are so weak? Our species knew no destruction. That is why we took on the name of the Weird Dragons. Of Nornir! We became the leaders of the Unit who transcended fate and deciphered the Yggdrasil System. We were supposed to become the Norns, those who govern the world... the Eternal Witches...”

“Why couldn’t you?”

Her answer was immediate. “Because someone already governed the world. No... maybe that is not accurate. This may only confuse you, but there were no goddesses of fate. That is what led to our misunderstanding. But then they appeared.”

The truest of her statements was that she would confuse him. So he thought bitterly. He could not comprehend her words.

“All we were able to govern was this one continent. Only Kieselhima, which in truth is too small to even call a continent. The giants’ continent, Jötunheimr, was destroyed. No... this world, the universe itself, returned to ash. All of Midgard became prey to the new System...”

“I don’t understand, Mother—”

“But you must! For you are the Seventh Unit!”

“‘Unit’...?” he repeated, uncomprehending. He’d never heard the term before.

Istersiva’s gaze sharpened. “The Yggdrasil Unit... That is what the gods who appeared called us dragons. And...” Her expression soured. “They sowed the seeds of our destruction. It could happen to you next. That is what you must be wary of.”

“I don’t understand!” he repeated, almost screaming. He could not comprehend a single thing she was saying. It was all his confused mind could do to just prevent himself from fleeing. “The gods who appeared? To what do you refer? I know the legend. That you stole your magic from the gods. But you also said there were no gods on this continent!”

“Not on this continent.” Her voice was hard again, while still remaining calm and cool. It produced a beautiful, slightly raspy sound, her breath escaping at the same time. *Not on this continent.*

Something cold cut through the heat that had been filling his head just a moment ago. He suddenly understood.

He slowly raised the dagger in his hand to head height. The blade shone brilliantly, almost like a toy. He focused on it, gaze hardened, as if entranced by the luster of it. When he looked past it, he realized she was staring at the blade, too. Their eyes met, the dagger in between them. Moist green eyes and dry black ones.

There was pity in her eyes that she seemed to direct at herself before closing them. He had no way of knowing what she was thinking. But he thought he might be able to understand what she was feeling.

He began to tremble as he finally understood what he was feeling. It was not love.

It is not love, he stated clearly to himself. It was nothing so simple.

Fear. Awe. Incomprehension. Comprehension. But when all those were present at once, the resulting feeling did resemble love.

Chapter IV: He Waited for Her Words. And...

“...So, when you say you ‘can’t use it’...” The slightly annoyed, incredulous words came from Salua. “Is that something that happens often?” he asked, flexing his fingers with their newly-regenerated nails.

They’d gone up the stairs and relocated to the guardroom after tying up the soldiers and locking them in Salua’s cell (they made Leki fix the door). Needless to say, the guardroom was much more comfortable than the cell. It was decently large, with a desk and some chairs, so they didn’t have to sit on the floor. Orphen had been surprised to see a bottle of alcohol and some glasses, but when he smelled the bottle, he realized it was only filled with water. One of the guards must have been using it as a water jug. The door was sturdy iron like the others, and according to Salua, it led to the Cathedral.

Orphen took a look around the room and asked, “Why do you know so much about this place?” After he asked the question, he wondered if Salua found himself here often.

Majic and Claiomh watched him nervously from a slight distance. They both had the exact same concerned look on their faces. Orphen was looking at them instead of Salua when he addressed the man.

Salua gave them a glance as well and shrugged his shoulders with a smirk. “Our position and our work are a secret in this town.” By “our,” he likely meant Death Instructors. “Most of us hide out under the pretense that we’re high-ranking Instructors for the Cathedral Office, but I’m a little too young to pull off an Instructor. You said you ran into Name earlier?” The glint in his eyes was harsh even as his tone was carefree. It said that he knew exactly what their encounter had been like. “That kid’s young too, despite how he looks. He got roped into acting like some kind of spy in the slums. I was a little more lucky than him. When I’m in town, I basically work as a priest soldier. When I leave town, I’m ‘Instructor Salua,’ and I get an escort. So I know when the shifts change here. We’ll be safe here until dawn.”

“Your age, huh...” Orphen muttered, returning the bottle to the table.

Salua didn’t look younger than Orphen, but he was probably 22 at most. Maybe 23.

“Then... I couldn’t tell with their masks, but were those priest soldiers just kids, too?”

“You could say that. Kids make the best soldiers, after all. Can’t say I see what difference it makes, though.”

“I have a question—”

“Wait.” Salua cut him off. His injuries had all been healed by Leki, at Claiomh’s request. All the ones on the surface, anyway. When he stood at his full height after recovering, the Death Instructor was quite tall. He had a lanky image to him, but he was by no means slimmer than average.

In any case, he raised his eyebrows, not hiding his annoyance in the least. Brushing his hair back, he told Orphen, “You haven’t answered *my* question yet. ‘Course, I get why you might not want to.”

“That’s not important right—”

“What’s more important than our most powerful fighter suddenly losing all his strength, huh? Why don’t you tell me that?”

Orphen silently pulled the closest chair to him, leaning on it for a moment before collapsing onto it. He hung his head, covering his face with his hands.

“Orphen!” Claiomh shouted, surprised. She ran over to him and grabbed him by the shoulders, turning and yelling at Salua, “You don’t have to rub it in!”

“I don’t think he was trying to.” The muttered response had come from Majic. Since Orphen was covering his face, he couldn’t see him, but his voice had come from close by, so he must have run over with Claiomh. Or maybe she’d dragged him with her. Maybe the latter was more likely.

“Listen...” Salua said, reaching the end of his patience. “Maybe this isn’t true for kids, but adults need to hear it straight every once in a while. So look at me, Krylancelo.”

Orphen raised his head. He glared at Salua, but no matter how much hostility

was in his eyes, he couldn't make the other man so much as flinch.

Salua smiled, in fact, and said, "Quit making such a fuss about what I call you. I doubt the young ones over there even know what it means anyway. It's just funny seeing you make such a big deal about it."

"Stop making fun of us!" The retort came from Claiomh, for some reason.

Orphen flapped his mouth pointlessly, looking over at Claiomh, who was doing some sort of victory pose or something. As he watched, she proudly puffed her chest out and took something like a notebook out from her pocket.

"It just so happens that I take notes about everything I hear that I think I'll probably forget! In fact, they called me Note-Taker Claiomh at school, which is kind of hard to say!" After this speech, she began to flip through her notebook.

Orphen shot a questioning look at Majic while this was going on, who could only nod tiredly in response. Though the gesture seemed more like a comment along the lines of, "You can just make up whatever nickname you want about yourself, can't you?" to Orphen.

Claiomh thrust out a page of the notebook at Salua, who was too surprised to really react. Leki yawned atop her head, curling up and attempting to sleep.



“It’s right here! Umm... ‘Krylancelo.’ #1 on Names I’ll Probably Bite My Tongue Trying to Say.”

“How are those sorted?!” Orphen was finally compelled to kick his chair aside and leap to his feet. He stomped over to her as she wagged her finger at him and went on.

“There’s more where that came from. Rearrange the letters and it becomes Cnlelokyra. That’s even harder to say!”

“Shut up!” Orphen snatched the notebook from her hand and flung it to the floor, stomping on it a few times for good measure. Then he turned to Salua, ignoring Claiomh’s accusatory shout. “Goddammit! You’re right! Moping isn’t going to solve anything!”

“By the way, if you make it Lanykelor, it kind of sounds like Ladykiller.”

“I think you’re missing a letter there.”

Ignoring the nonsensical conversation Claiomh and Majic were having next to him, Orphen folded his arms and finally said, “No. A sorcerer can’t just become unable to use sorcery.” He could feel Claiomh and Majic go silent and turn to look at him, but he ignored them.

Salua gave him a dubious look, but Orphen held his hand up before he could say anything.

“It’s just not possible. I don’t know why my spells aren’t activating either. The sense that we call our ‘magic power’ is something that we’re born with. It can’t just disappear. We channel this into something called ‘compositions’ to control it...”

“Compositions?” Claiomh repeated blankly.

Orphen responded without turning to her. “It’d take me a while to explain it properly, but basically... they’re like blueprints for using sorcery. We’re all limited by the magic power we possess, but we use sorcery to essentially create our ideal world. So the compositions are the images we’re going for. We form the composition of a spell and fill it with magic, then use an incantation to determine the scope of the spell.”

“So, which part of that process can’t you do?” Salua asked coolly.

Orphen thought for a short while, then stated, “I can’t form compositions anymore.”

“What?” Majic exclaimed in surprise. This time, Orphen turned to him. The boy had both his arms thrust out underneath his dirty, and now fraying, cloak. It was a hackneyed gesture, but his panic did seem genuine. “So, you mean... basically...” As he put meaning on what he had realized, his voice grew quieter and quieter until he was just moving his mouth in silence.

Claiomh put up her pointer finger next to him. “So you mean you’ve become an amateur?”

“Basically.”

“...Like, around Majic’s level?”

“Worse,” Orphen spat, then turned back to Salua. “Never mind a fireball, right now, I probably couldn’t create a breeze,” he told him bitterly.

Salua looked at him with that same cool gaze. His wounds were healed now, but his clothes were still bloody rags. He wore the same outfit as those priest soldiers, but because of all the tears in it, it looked a lot more worn. Though maybe some of that was just because it *was* more worn.

As Orphen watched him, Salua sighed. He moved his eyes from Orphen to the ceiling and scratched his head wryly. “The key is dawn. Only night will be our ally... When morning comes, the next shift of guards will come and they’ll notice that my corpse is gone. So, dawn. Before dawn, we need to get ahead of our enemies.” As he explained, he produced the two batons he’d taken from the guards from his pocket and tossed one over to Orphen.

After it spun through the air between them, Orphen caught it. It was a metal rod about 30 centimeters long, and it was pretty light, so it must have been hollow. But the metal was hard and solid. His palm stung a bit where he’d caught it.

Salua sighed and spoke. “Like I said, the guards will change at dawn. And we’ll be safe here until then, but we can’t just relax until we’re caught. Let’s get up to the surface and flee into town. Loath as I am to suggest it, if we hide at my

house, we can buy ourselves half a day. Even Quo can't just bust into my brother's place, after all."

He gave a smirk and a wink to the blank-faced Orphen, and the assassin with the baton, in the bloody priest's clothes, said lightly, "Well, that's the situation. Let's use whatever weapons we can, partner."



"Whaaaaat'sgooooiiingooon?!"

"Translation: 'What's going on?'—but I'm not sure how to answer that question myself," Dortin stated plainly. He raised his head from where he was crouched in the center of the small room, poking at the remains of a small fire with a stick for some reason.

His brother was spinning around meaninglessly in the middle of the room, which the small light was doing its very best to illuminate. He spun around like a top, sword in hand, before thrusting the sword towards the door and exclaiming, "The mystery is here!"

The door was just a door, ultimately. The last time they'd seen it, it had been a door, and when they looked at it now, it was still a door.

The room they were in was basically just a little hut. There was nothing separating the entrance from the rest of the room. The door opened straight into the room. There was no welcome mat, no umbrella stand, not even a mailbox.

It was just a door.

Dortin turned questioningly to Volkan, who exclaimed, "That was just a feint! It's here!" He spun to turn his blade to the bed. He must have just pointed in the wrong direction because of the spinning.

Whatever. Dortin looked at the bed instead, truly uninterested in his brother's antics.

The bed was empty. There was no sign there of the woman who should have been occupying it.



“Where on earth did that woman go?! True, I may have been a bit harsh with my criticism yesterday about her tyrannical ways, but for her to run off in the night because of that... Young women these days really don’t have the guts to be full-fledged members of society!”

“I’m not sure what society has to do with it.” The remains of the fire were in the center of the room—a small, round mound of ash. The cold ash was the color of a lemon after mixing with the sand that constantly blew through the town. With just a regular flame, there was no way to produce ash this pristine. As Dortin poked and prodded at it with his stick, he didn’t find the slightest bit of wood or solid material.

Suddenly realizing something, Dortin spoke up. “Did you criticize her yesterday, Brother?”

Beyond Dortin’s thick glasses, his brother was still frozen with his sword pointed at the bed. “Well, I may have a hero’s magnanimity, but even I could not remain silent in the face of that damn harpy’s tyranny!” he exclaimed dramatically, clenching his fist.

Getting riled up now, Volkan jumped up onto the bed and stood tall, shoes still on. “First of all! When she spends all her time lazing around in here whether awake or asleep, it’s outrageous of her to send the people’s hero, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, Vulcano Volkan, out on an errand! This is surely a conspiracy that could lead to the end of the world! Thus, the punishment for such an affront would normally be death by stranding in a blizzard of cherry blossom petals!”

“Huh.” If a thing like that was the end of the world, then there would be millions of catastrophes every time a married couple got into a rut in their relationship, but Dortin kept such retorts to himself.

“Second! Of all things, that slothful vixen said to ME, the Great Hero and Lonely Dandy Vulcano Volkan, ‘You’re useless, so the least you could do is take the garbage out before being told to.’ Absolutely outrageous! A verbal offense deserving of being cursed to death by a mysterious spell!”

“Huh.” *What’s a Lonely Dandy?* Dortin wondered, of course staying silent again.

Really on a roll now, Volkan struck another pose, his cloak flapping behind him despite the lack of wind inside the room. Dortin could see him fanning it with his hand. “Indeed! And so, destined to bravely carry out justice from birth as I was, I gave that woman an ultimatum after her many misdeeds! ‘*Please*, could you just treat us better?’ I said to her!”

“...It really was only a bit harsh, huh?” Having no idea how he should respond to his brother, Dortin eventually settled on just stating his thoughts.

In the end, there was probably nothing they could do... Dortin thought to himself as he mixed around the ash with his stick. Basically, that woman, the black sorcerer called Azalie, had hired the two of them to do shopping and scouting in town for her, since this was the sort of place where if the townspeople caught sight of a sorcerer, they’d drop everything and attack with whatever weapons they could find nearby. For a sorcerer to sneak into Kimluck of all places, she must have had some reason to, so it wasn’t that strange that she’d suddenly disappeared on them—and he wouldn’t be surprised if she reappeared tomorrow as a corpse.

The problem was, without her, the two of them had no way to get out of the city on their own.

To get in, they’d used a teleportation device she’d had that was apparently dragon technology. She hadn’t been able to use that device to get into the cathedral, however. But because of that, they’d need the device to leave the city as well—there was no way two dwarves with no identification or documents could pass the inspection at the gates.

Dortin doubted his brother had that clear a grasp on the situation, but he at least seemed to understand the gravity of their situation.

“Well, there’s really only one thing we can do: wait,” he muttered with a sigh. Waiting for the black sorcerer’s return was their only option.

Suddenly feeling a different sensation on the end of his stick, Dortin was surprised. He’d thought the pile was composed of only ash, but there was a fragment of something black a little ways away from the center of the pile.

The fragment was familiar to Dortin. It was a warped triangle of black leather.

It's a corner of the cover of that book... It escaped the fire. He couldn't believe she'd burn a book. Humans really are savages. Even sorcerers who receive the ultimate education do things like this...

Dortin flicked the fragment of book with his stick as he lamented to himself.



Maybe it was because they were underground, but the passageway was absolutely filthy.

There were no signs that it was being cleaned, and sand clung to the floor, to the walls, everywhere. The sandy walls boxed them in from both sides. It wasn't a very wide passageway, and the ceiling was low, too. There was also very little lighting, of course.

Salua held a portable gas lamp he'd found in the guard station that projected a low ring of light around him. They pushed on, letting that light lead the way, though it wasn't a silent journey.

"This town's always been a holy ground for the Kimluck faithful—they've always prayed here and believed in that." Salua, in the lead, was explaining things to Claiomh, who walked beside him. "And at the center of the town, and the center of the faith, is the Yggdrasil Cathedral. I dunno who had the idea to build such a stupidly huge cathedral, but the people who agreed with them were pretty messed up in the head, too. It took thirty years to build it, which was actually pretty fast, if you ask me. It was finished around 100 years ago, after a hefty investment, of course." Salua rapped his baton on the wall, and a dry *crack* resounded through the hallway.

Orphen opened his mouth as he watched Salua from behind. It wasn't that he wanted to explain things to the boy who walked beside him (who was staunchly refusing to look at or speak to him), but in any case, he said, "The pope at the time was called Ramonirok. The name's been passed down since then, so the current pope has the same name..."

Salua chuckled and Orphen looked up at him to find him making a gesture to ward off evil. It was the holy sign.

"...?" Since Salua never explained why he'd laughed, Orphen went on with his

explanation. “Anyway, one theory has it that Ramonirok built this cathedral as a fortress to protect the holy land from dragons. They were still around at the time, after all. The Weird Dragons ruled over and protected our ancestors... This was before the age of sorcerer hunting.”

“Though the cathedral wasn’t actually finished until after the sorcerer hunts.” Salua shrugged, and the light he held swayed. Leki turned his head, following the light as it moved.

Claiomh’s head moved in the same way as the baby dragon stepped on it. “Did they build those huge underground tunnels at the same time?” she asked casually.

Orphen wanted to know the same thing. He watched Salua in a silent entreaty for him to answer.

The Death Instructor’s only response, however, was to grin, though Orphen had been expecting that. After a moment, he added only this: “Humans didn’t build that. But you’d already figured that out, right?”

“Then who built them?” Orphen couldn’t help showing his frustration as he asked, but Salua just kept smirking.

Eventually, he settled on his response. Tapping the baton to his neck, he said casually, “You’re the elite of the elite when it comes to sorcery, aren’t you? Can’t you tell?”

“I wouldn’t be asking if I could.”

“Tell me what you *have* figured out, then.”

Orphen cursed silently and stayed quiet. But as he walked, he tried to do what Salua had said.

There wasn’t much he’d figured out. The tunnels were beyond what human technology was capable of. They were pretty old. Maybe older than the city above them. In which case, there might have been a reason to build Kimluck on top of the tunnels. The way they were built seemed to resemble Celestial ruins, but if the Celestials had built them, they wouldn’t have deteriorated so much...

Orphen took a deep breath. “I understand.”

“Oh?” Salua didn’t turn around.

Orphen squinted. “I understand that I’m not gonna figure it out on my own.”

“I see.” Salua was scratching his back with the baton.

As they walked on in silence after that, Claiomh alone raised her voice, saying, “What the heck?” with a blank look on her face. “You won’t tell us the answer?” she asked Salua, pulling on his sleeve, but Salua didn’t even spare her a glance.

He walked along somewhat unsteadily, saying only, “Young people only want perfect answers. Why don’t you think about it on your own a little more?”

“Do you think you sound cool or something? There’s only gonna be one answer as to why somebody would build those stupidly huge tunnels. How is thinking about it gonna help us figure it out?” Claiomh said with her usual blithe tone. She pouted like she was chatting about something meaningless, walking down a hall at school. “And, ‘young people’? You can’t be that much older than us.”

“I’m flattered you think so,” Salua said, slapping a hand to his forehead with a groan.

“...You really act like an old man,” Claiomh muttered.

“That’s not very flattering,” Salua groaned in the same exact way a second time. Removing his hand from his forehead, he retrieved the baton from wherever he’d put it and spun it around.

“Could it be...” The voice suddenly joining the conversation belonged to Majic. He was still not looking at Orphen and had his mouth half-open even after he finished speaking. His tone was uncertain, as if he were thinking aloud. “Maybe they really are Celestial ruins.”

“I told you, there’s no way they could be—” Orphen started, but Majic was still speaking.

He suddenly stopped, and his half-lidded eyes snapped wide open. “Right. They’re too broken down. But that doesn’t necessarily mean they can’t be Celestial ruins, right? Right.” He finally made eye contact with Orphen. Taking a deep breath, perhaps out of excitement, he continued, “It’s not that they’re too

destroyed to be Celestial ruins—maybe it's that something incredible enough to destroy Celestial ruins to that extent happened. Since they're so old, it would make sense for us not to have heard about whatever happened. It might have even happened before humans came to this continent. The ruins in Alenhatam were the same, right? The underground ones remained, but everything aboveground was completely blown away by the Beastking..."

"No." Orphen shook his head. Majic was looking his way enthusiastically, but he slowly denied the boy's theory. "See, even though everything aboveground was destroyed, the underground was still unscathed. Celestials built fortresses and such underground because they were easier to defend there. So everything they built underground was ridiculously sturdy. And with the scale of those tunnels, I can't imagine how powerful the enchantments on them would have been. What the hell kind of monster could have possibly destroyed something like that?"

He hadn't meant anything in particular by the explanation. He was just listing things he knew to be true. But instead of agreement or disagreement, he was met with only silence. Finding that curious, he looked around. The reason Claiomh was silent was because she was looking at Salua, who had a surprised look on his face. Majic was the same. He appeared to be taken aback by the expression on the Death Instructor's face.

And Salua was silent... because he was looking at Majic. With one eyebrow raised and a mixture of amazement and commendation on his face. He suddenly put his arm around Majic's shoulder with a whistle. "Huh." He smirked and looked at Claiomh. Poking her forehead with the tip of his baton, he said, "See, I didn't have to tell you. It's easy enough to figure out with some thought."

"...Huh?" The one who was most surprised by this was Majic. He stared at Salua with a puzzled look as the Death Instructor patted him on the back in an overly familiar way.

Salua dragged Majic up to the front of the marching order with him, kicking Claiomh behind them. "Since you got the right answer, you should sit at the head of the table." He let go of Majic with that incomprehensible comment.

“Why’d you kick me?!” Claiomh complained, patting the footprint off of her jeans. Of course, there wasn’t much point to this, considering how much sand was already covering her.

Finally understanding what Salua was saying, Orphen yelled, “He was right?!”

“Yep.” Salua smirked. He hooked the ring at the top of the gas lamp on his baton and swung it around. “It was the greatest and final fortress the Celestials built around 300 years ago. It was called... what was it, again? I forgot. But the scale is so massive, we can’t even close the entrances, let alone bury the thing. Plus, it’s completely crumbled in some spots, so rain will get in and weaken the ground, and then all of a sudden there’s a new entrance somewhere. If you didn’t get lost or chased around by Death Instructors down there, it’d basically be a free pass from the outer rings into the cathedral district.”

“...You know, I’ve got a great way to fix that nasty personality of yours,” Orphen spat at him.

Salua smirked again, then gave Orphen a theatrically curious look. “Oh? And what would that be?”

“Well, first, we’ll hang a big sign from your neck that says ‘I’m a Death Instructor,’ and then you can take a nice, relaxing stroll from one end of the grounds of the Tower of Fangs to the other.”

“I’ll hold off. I don’t want to die after being told I act like an old man,” he said with a snide laugh.

It wasn’t that this behavior pissed him off that badly, but something suddenly struck Orphen and he grabbed Salua by the collar, pulling the Death Instructor to him and whispering, “Sorcerers don’t just kill people for no reason.” The headache he had almost forgotten about seared his brain, causing his face to twitch with the pain.

Salua just kept smirking, but there was a hint of scorn in what had previously just been bemusement. “...Really?” was all he asked, like he’d seen through everything.

With the headache, an intense pain ran through his right wrist. Orphen sucked in a breath and crumbled to the ground. The hand he’d grabbed Salua

with was curled into a shape like a dead spider, fingers twitching. Annoyed that he couldn't fully control it yet, Orphen slammed his right hand to the ground and gave it a furious punch with his left.

"Orphen?! What are you—" Claiomh crouched down next to him.

Orphen ignored her, grimacing from the pain. His hand had stopped twitching, but now his whole body felt fatigued; he could barely move. He was desperately struggling to resist the sensation of tears welling up that he could feel around his cheekbones. He closed his eyes, hoping to cut them off, and asked himself a question he wasn't even sure of the answer to. *Was that... the pain of being hit by my left hand, or the pain of hitting my right hand?* He wasn't asking anyone else, or even himself. He was just throwing the question out. Or perhaps throwing it away.

Eventually... he let out a breath. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he met Claiomh's concerned gaze. "...I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Her tone was doubtful. She'd crouched down so fast that Leki had fallen from her head, so he was at her feet, looking around in confusion. Suddenly ejected from his comfortable napping spot, all the baby dragon could do was roll around, uncomprehending.

Claiomh watched Leki for a minute, then hugged him to her chest and said, "You're covered in sweat, Orphen."

"Yeah." Though some of it was tears. But he was fine. He stood, without voicing that part. "I haven't gotten much relaxing sleep lately. The fatigue just made me dizzy for a sec." Orphen shook his head, holding down his eyelids, since his vision was still flickering a bit. When he opened his eyes, he found Salua helping Claiomh up. "...So what is it that could have caused so much destruction to a Celestial ruin, then? You're acting like you know the answer."

"...Well..." Salua said, clearly not intending on answering.

This in itself was his answer, Orphen sensed. He held back the annoyed-looking Claiomh with a hand, glanced at Majic, who still appeared to be looking around in confusion, and then returned his gaze to Salua.

The smile faded from the young Death Instructor's face. He gave Orphen a

cold, harsh glare, then asked, “Are you sure you guys aren’t wildly underestimating us?”

“Hunh...?” was all the uncomprehending Orphen could say. But the change in the Death Instructor’s attitude made him smoothly push Claiomh behind him and glance down at the baton on the ground. He’d dropped it during his fit earlier.

Salua, however, showed no signs that he was about to suddenly attack. He still had the gas lamp on the end of his baton, which was no state to be fighting in. “Have you never thought about what it is we’re trying to accomplish by putting our lives on the line?” he said quietly, then spun on his heels and started walking down the hallway again, dragging Majic by the arm behind him.

Orphen and Claiomh (Leki, too) exchanged dubious looks before following after Salua, Orphen making sure he picked up his baton while he was at it.

Salua was walking quickly now, taking great strides. He continued speaking, voice still quiet, “It’s like I said before. Why don’t you give it some thought? Frankly, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you sorcerers stop to think about anything before. Personally, I don’t give a shit about pure blood or cursed blood or wherever sorcerers come from.”

He was silent for some time after that.

“...I’ve probably seen too much of the outside world. To borrow the words of our rotten old pope, anyway. Exterminate all sorcerers. That’s the creed here, but it’s not like I was stirred by those words into picking up my blade. I just didn’t want to be bored. And it’s boring watching people who don’t even try to think for themselves. So... think, why don’t you?”

Easy for you to say, Orphen muttered to himself with a groan. It wasn’t as if he had no idea what the Death Instructor was trying to say to him, but he still wasn’t quite sure how to respond. *What is with this guy? And why’d he take off down the hall and start muttering all this stuff*— That’s when Orphen realized. He stopped.

Claiomh stopped with him, and when Salua noticed the two of their footsteps disappear, he stopped as well. He turned around and glared at them, so fiercely that Majic, whose arm he was still grabbing, stepped back in fright. Orphen

returned his gaze until Salua twitched, suddenly coming back to himself. Slowly... bit by bit... the sardonic grin returned to his face.

“A-Anyway... all I’m trying to say is...” He cleared his throat and let go of Majic. “Stop relying on other people for everything. Me, especially. Because it’s annoying.”

Orphen wouldn’t hear it, though. He thrust his pointer finger forward. “In other words, you just get super embarrassed when you have to lecture people. Even though you’re an Instructor!”

“Oh, shut it!” Salua shouted, turning red. He corrected himself then, muttering, “My brother’s a real lecturer, so I don’t want to end up like him. Oh... Guess we stopped at a good time,” he said, looking up.

They were already at the end of the passageway. There was a hole in the ceiling, and on the wall, a ladder that was like a set of large iron staples pounded into the stone.

“What’s this?” Claiomh asked.

Salua swiftly supplied the answer. “Up this hole is the lowest floor of the cathedral.”

“The lowest floor? So, what, we’re lower than the lowest floor now?”

“Yep, under the lowest floor is the dungeon. That’s just how it is,” Salua said glumly.

Claiomh whispered into Orphen’s ear, “D’you hear that, Orphen? That was kinda philosophical, don’t you think? I think despite what that guy says, he actually likes lecturing people.”

“...I think he can hear you.” He was sure of it, in fact, since Claiomh’s whispering was pretty loud. And since Salua was staring at them, his shoulders trembling with anger.

“Whatever. I’ll climb up first,” Salua said, grabbing the ladder. There weren’t that many rungs since the ceiling was low. Standing on the floor, you could reach it if you stretched up.

“Oh, right,” Salua said while he was on the ladder. “I just remembered the

name those tunnels had when they were a fortress.”

“Who cares about that?” Claiomh said flippantly.

“Well, just hear it,” Salua said, waving his hand. “Yes, I believe it was...” he said slowly, quietly. “...Fort Ragnarok.” Salua climbed the ladder, disappearing into the ceiling. His hand reached back down, beckoning them up after him.

Orphen looked at Majic, then Claiomh, and put his hand on the ladder.

“Wait a second,” Majic stopped him. He strode over to Orphen and said, “I’ll go first. You’re still not at 100%, right, Master?”

Orphen silently loosened his grip on the ladder, eventually letting his hand slip off the rung entirely.

“Scuse me,” Majic gave him a little nod and went up the ladder first.

Claiomh whispered—this time quietly—to Orphen, “What’s up?”

“It’s complicated.” Orphen smiled bitterly, feeling not his headache this time but a prick of pain in his chest.

“Hey.” Salua’s upside-down head suddenly appeared from the hole. He put a finger to his lips and said, “It’s not a problem yet, but you’re gonna have to be quiet soon. Unlike up until now, on the lowest level, there might actually be people around.”

“Got it.”

It was silent after that.

Orphen sent Claiomh up first, then left the hallway last. That dark hallway, full of swirling sand.

When he climbed up, he found himself in a small room, probably a closet or something. With the four of them stuffed into the small space, Claiomh swiftly opened her mouth to complain, but Orphen just as swiftly covered it with his hand. He really didn’t want to get into any more trouble.

...Looks like we might make it out of here after all. Ignoring Claiomh, who had launched a furious assault on his fingers with her teeth, knowing she’d never beat him in a battle of strength, Orphen was starting to relax a little. There was

certainly plenty not to like about Salua, but as long as they were with him, it didn't seem like it would be too hard to escape from here.

For now, Orphen had succeeded in his plan to enter the cathedral district, he'd just gone too far and ended up in the actual cathedral itself. He had no interest in the cathedral. It was just... *This is probably where Azalie's headed... I'm pretty sure of that...* If her goal was, as she'd told him before, to follow in Master Childman's footsteps, then she would surely come here. He was certain Master Childman had also infiltrated this place ten years ago, after all, though he didn't know what for.

Orphen calmly looked around the room. It was covered in dust, with crates and shelves here and there. It was probably a secret entrance to the dungeon. They clearly did not want anyone knowing that such a thing was underneath the cathedral. Not that he knew what sort of people were locked up down there anyway.

He was forced to smile bitterly again then. He understood now why Majic had gone up ahead of him. It was because his head was working a lot slower than it usually did. Orphen sighed. What sort of people were imprisoned down there? That was obvious. It was people like them. They imprisoned people who snuck into the cathedral there and interrogated them. Then, after their interrogation, they were disposed of through that garbage chute.

Recalling how weathered some of the bones in the underground tunnels were, Orphen felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. Just how long had they been doing such things? *Not that it matters...* Orphen sighed again and closed his eyes. It didn't matter. The Yggdrasil Cathedral, the underground, Salua, none of it mattered. When they got out of the cathedral, would it be close to dawn? Salua's phrase, that "the key was dawn," came to his mind. He had to move forward by dawn.

And to me, forward means... The answer was clear to him. As soon as he got out, he had to find Azalie. There was no time to rest.

Salua silently opened the door to the room. Majic silently left. Even Claiomh silently followed him.

The key is dawn... Orphen repeated to himself, stepping through the doorway.

And in the next instant, he screamed at the top of his lungs. “WHAAAT?!”

Outside of the small room was a wide passageway. No, maybe it was more apt to call it a colonnade. It was a colonnade with walls. They couldn’t actually be marble, but were simply white walls that resembled marble. And countless magnificent pillars, also white, each with a marble engraving upon it. The floor was a sparkling indigo, so polished that they could almost see their faces in it at their feet. The reflection was somewhat murky due to the sand that filled even this space, however.

It wasn’t too bright, the only illumination coming from several lanterns placed regularly throughout the hall.

The ceiling was shockingly high. There was a huge gate to the left of them after leaving the small room. Easily three meters tall, its door had a lattice grate in a pattern like there were briars wrapped around it.

And ahead of them was a set of stairs. Wide, tall stone stairs, with a gentle, regular slope. On the stairs, lined up as if they were taking a graduation photo, were dozens of priest soldiers.



He waited for her words. And...

“You will not be able to pierce me with that blade,” she said, rather abruptly.

He felt his grip on the blade slip with sweat. It wasn’t as if there was any magic in the silver blade. It was just a dagger. It had none of the miraculous power the woman before him used on the regular. It was a mere metal tool in the hand of a mere human man.

Did I really even mean to kill her? With such a thing... The meaningless question wrenched at his chest. He was all too aware that if he’d brought a sword, or magic, he would be equally unable to harm her. It was all meaningless.

He’d merely wanted to face her. That may have been all it was.

She reached her hand out to him, graceful even through her grief and exhaustion...

“I will erase you from this world.”

He could say nothing in response.

Strangely, he felt his fear vanish. Because of her declaration. Maybe this was what he had been expecting from the beginning. He might even have been hoping for it. The only thing he didn't know was himself. He gripped the blade once more, with both hands, as if embracing it.

“...You were the one who created me.” The words he was able to bring forth were more worthless than he had been expecting. “If I am to be destroyed by you—”

“I told you that you would not be destroyed.”

He smiled bitterly at Isterviva's tranquil tone. “Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“Cursed by the gods, our fate unwound, we cannot believe in any of their laws, reincarnation included.” Her fingers slowly danced.

Slender fingers each moved without rest, none moving in exactly the same way, as if dancing, as if singing, tracing lines in the air. Small points of light dwelled at each fingertip, so that as they moved, lines of silver light followed them.

The lines drew a complex figure in the air. These were Wyrd Glyphs, the medium for Weird Dragons' silent magic.

She spoke as she added layers and layers of complexity to the glyphs. “As your creator, it was my intention to give you the best education that I could. And you made the best possible use of that education. Your sorcery, of course, is superlative, and in knowledge, decisiveness, adaptability, foresight... there is surely no one among current humans who surpasses you. But in the far future, your descendants could be reaching those heights even without our help. Or they may not be. That is what is important, my child.”

Chapter V: He Was Sure the Magic Would Kill Him

24 enemies—Orphen reflexively judged the number without actually counting. 24 priest soldiers, all dressed the same and with basically the same build. What caught his eye first was the weapons they all held—metal batons just like the one he was currently gripping.

24 of them.

“Well, that’s quick...” Salua muttered, tone strangely light considering the situation they were in. His voice was loud enough that it seemed like he wanted them to hear it, but his words were directed only at himself. “So much for dawn. Pretty shrewd of you to set up an ambush right outside the Poet’s Chamber.”

“Not as shrewd as you, Salua Solude...” The response didn’t come from one of the priest soldiers.

Orphen stayed on his guard, moving just his eyes to the side. Away from the stairs where the soldiers stood in front of them, and toward the large door with the grate on it.

He couldn’t see beyond the door due to the complexity of the grate, but underneath it stood a man, leaned against the door and watching them with his arms crossed. He was a man so large as to make Orphen doubt his own eyes. He wore strange armor over his upper body, and a fiendish glare on his face.

Mädchen’s words from the day before yesterday ran through his mind: *He’s 190 centimeters tall and weighs about 80 kilos—slimmer than Oleyl. For a forty-year-old guy, anyway. He’s always got this look on his face like he’s mad about something. He never gets mad, though. He’s got these really bulky shoulders... I think I heard someone say he looks like he has three heads once. His muscles aren’t just for show, though. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I once saw him snap a bat in two like it was nothing...*

Mädchen’s description had been accurate. The man’s cold glare was focused

on them. Orphen could sense an almost predatory malice in it. The way his cheekbones jutted out made his face look like a mask. His physique looked like a sculpture done by a half-asleep artist, and he was wearing oddly-shaped armor over it, too.

The armor puzzled Orphen. Even compared to prototype protection sorcerers had developed for battle, it was strangely shaped. Sorcerers' armor differed depending on the level of protection, but all sets shared some commonalities. Basically, they had to be designed so that you could move while wearing them.

Humans with internal skeletons can't move their bodies when armor is placed around them like the exoskeleton of a bug. If your entire arm is encased in armor, the arm becomes immobile. There's no way to get around this. Even the heaviest armor, meant for war, has gaps at the joints so that they can be freely moved. Basically, all armor that a human can wear will have necessary vulnerabilities.

But the armor the large man was wearing was on another level entirely in that regard. It covered none of his vital areas. The crimson plate covered only his back and his chest. His sides and stomach were completely exposed. His arms were also completely uncovered, meaning he had great mobility, but if he took one attack to his upper arm, he could be incapacitated instantly. It was the same with his neck. In addition, there were pieces of armor jutting from his back like wings—these would clearly just hinder him. He couldn't hold any large weapons with those protrusions—probably a sword at most. Plus, if they were hit by a spear from a distance, he would likely lose his balance.

From every angle he could think of, it was completely non-functional armor. And his lower body—which should have been easier to armor than his upper body—was protected only by white pants made of slightly thicker fabric.

The man slowly pushed himself off of the door. The swords at his hips swayed with the movement, but made no sound. He opened the hard slit of his mouth ever so slightly... so slightly that his teeth couldn't even be seen through the opening. "Colluding with sorcerers... What is the meaning of this, Salua?"

"There's no need to be hasty here." Salua turned to him, spitting out saliva mixed with sand.

Orphen watched him, inching backwards. *The situation's too dire...* They had no escape. There was no way forward, either. The stairs, which were probably the only way to the surface, were blocked by over 20 priest soldiers, and Orphen couldn't use the one countermeasure he had against a large, armed group, his sorcery.

If they had one trump card, it was Claiomh and Leki's sorcery, but when Orphen reached out to tell them that... *Huh?* He frowned, a pit opening in his stomach. Claiomh was gone from the spot where she'd been seconds ago. If things went how they usually did at times like these...

"Hey!" he shouted, reaching out to Claiomh, who had started walking forward at a carefree, brisk pace. He just barely managed to catch her by the hair.

"Ow!" Claiomh turned around with a shocked yelp.

Orphen whispered to her, "Where do you think you're going?!"

"What do you mean, 'where'?" Claiomh pointed at the far end of the group of priest soldiers passively watching them, Leki still on her head. "If I want to ask Leki to boil all their cells at the molecular level and vaporize them—" Her finger swept across all the priest soldiers and landed on the large man at the door. "—then I have to go somewhere where he can see them all, right?"

"Don't do thaaaaat!" Orphen screamed at the blank-faced girl.

She gave him a surprised look, mirrored by Leki on top of her head. "Why not?"

"We're still underground, you know! What are you gonna do when the whole cathedral collapses on top of us?!"

"Well, I—" Claiomh started, then after thinking in silence for a moment, snapped her fingers. "We'll be fine! Karma's in our favor."

"...I think the situation we find ourselves in now should tell you all you need to know about our karma." That was all Orphen said, a heavy fatigue settling over him. He pulled Claiomh behind him without waiting for her response. As he expected, they would be of no help. He looked up to find Salua staring at them exasperatedly.

“...You done?”

“Yeah.”

Salua turned back to the large man, scratching his neck with his baton.

The large man had remained expressionless through the entire exchange. When his eyes met Salua’s, he spoke while barely moving his mouth again. “Last time we spoke, I seem to recall you crying and begging for forgiveness.”

“Hmm. I don’t remember that. Of course, I had all my nails ripped off and needles stuck in my throat and tongue at the time. I probably would have said anything. If you’d told me to, I bet I would have even given a marriage proposal. But anyway...” Salua gave Orphen a look. Then he raised his voice and addressed the priest soldiers instead of the large man. “Speaking of colluding, I’d like to know what *you’ve* been colluding with, Quo. You always made sure to have a Final Audience every week, but I get the sense that for the last six months or so—”

Just then...

All Orphen saw was a line of glittering light in the air. It seemed to touch Salua, and then—

“?!” Salua’s body floated into the air. It smashed into the closest wall as if repelled by something. The baton fell from Salua’s hand and clattered to the floor.

“What the...?” Orphen ran over to him, surprised.

He didn’t seem to have taken much damage, but he’d gotten the wind knocked out of him, so he couldn’t speak. Salua shakily stood from the ground and raised his hand, signaling Orphen to stop.

Orphen did so, not understanding why. He gripped his baton and faced the large man, Quo, in a battle-ready stance. He’d always been better with shorter weapons and had been trained to use a baton, too.

What was that...? There’s nothing I can do until I figure that out... The lines of light had vanished just as abruptly as they’d appeared. Salua had managed to stand and was staring down Quo, his back to Orphen. Remembering what he’d

just been saying, Orphen repeated it to himself. *Final... Audience?* Name Only had mentioned that before he died. Orphen had no idea what it meant, though. *Audience? Like a meeting with an important person? But who? The most important person in the Kimluck Church would be Pope Ramonirok, but... is that all it means?* He couldn't come up with the answer by just thinking about it. No, maybe he could...

Orphen warily watched the priest soldiers out of the corner of his eye. None of them had moved yet, but if they were ordered to, he was sure they would all leap at them at once. He had a limited amount of time to think. He felt a chill when he realized that if he didn't find the answer, his life might very well end right here. And he couldn't die, but... There were some things that you just couldn't help, no matter how stubborn you got. He was starting to think some pretty nihilistic thoughts.

His body started to heat up, then cooled down when he broke out into a cold sweat. As he went in circles like that for some time, his stamina was slowly depleting. Orphen licked his lips, starting to get annoyed. He'd need a blade to cut the cord of nihilism binding him. A sturdy blade. Something like hope. *Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to be a very hopeful situation...*

Sand whirled in the air. Through it, he could see Quo slowly moving forward. It was as if before he moved, the sand in the space he was moving to fled. Orphen couldn't help thinking that as he watched.

Quo drew not the sword at his hip but a shortsword sheathed on his back. The blade, 30 centimeters or so in length, hung from an arm much longer. It was then that the large man showed the first thing that could be called an expression on his face—a smile. A deep, dark smile, wrinkling the skin of his cheeks and brow.

“Why don't I remind you of what you told me...” Quo murmured. Quo Vadis Pater, Mädchen had said. The meaningless red wings on the back of his armor seemed to expand slightly. And then... the glittering lines of light he'd glimpsed earlier suddenly shot out around Quo. Even as he was dumbfounded by the “wings” unfolding like nets woven out of light, Orphen didn't miss what the man was murmuring.

“You said that you and Mädchen were going to kill me and then advise the pope to spread our doctrine throughout the whole continent.”

The priest soldiers had all been silent up until now, but a ripple went through them at that. It passed quickly over the surface of the water, and then everything was still once more.

“Oh yeah? Seems like I have pretty good ideas while I’m being tortured.” Salua picked up his baton and spun it around skillfully. He gripped it tight and then shouted, “If we keep opposing sorcerers... No, opposing everyone outside of the Holy City, then the Kimluck Church will fall one day—the best we can hope for is living pathetic, scattered lives, hiding our faces like those of the Dragon Faith. I know you know that. And I know you’re just using the pope as a puppet. If we get rid of you, then it’ll be easy to—” Salua suddenly stopped there.

Orphen felt a chill and flinched.

Quo Vadis Pater was smiling. But it wasn’t just any smile. He wasn’t laughing, but there was a hysterical, strained grin on the man’s face. Or maybe it was a look of rage. But he said nothing in response. Maybe that was the most strange thing about it.

Clearly feeling a little on edge, Salua nevertheless continued, forcing himself to grin. “I’ve got some interesting news for you too, Bossman. See who I’ve got with me?” He indicated Orphen. “This here’s Krylancelo of the Tower of Fangs. You’ve heard of him, haven’t you? He’s the student of Childman Powderfield, who you fought off. And I heard from Oleyl how you fought against the continent’s strongest sorcerer!”

The moment Salua told him that, the strange smile disappeared from Quo’s face. The lights then glimmered around Salua like they had before, and Salua leapt back, toward Orphen. The lights passed harmlessly through the spot where he’d just been standing.

Landing unharmed on the floor, Salua gave a confident chuckle. “Heh. That Ifrit you’re so proud of is nothing to worry about once you get the timing down.”

“Now that you’ve joined forces with a cursed sorcery user, there is nothing

that ties us together...” Quo ignored Salua’s words and held up his short sword. “Die.”

That un-priest-like word acted as a signal for the priest soldiers on the stairs to start slowly moving. They moved down step by step, not even the masks covering half of their faces hiding their bloodlust.

“Hey, Krylancelo...” Salua muttered as he continued to watch Quo. “I’ll take Quo. You handle all those priest soldiers.”

Orphen was stunned for a moment at the incredibly absurd suggestion. But he managed to groan out his response. “Wait a second! There’s no way I—I can’t use my sorcery right—”

“Well, don’t let them know that. These soldiers have never been outside this city. They’ve got barely any experience fighting sorcerers. They’re terrified of sorcery. Just so we’re clear, Quo’s way more of a threat than all of them combined.”

“Hey, what do we do, Orphen?!” Claiomh shouted at him. Leki was waving his arms (front legs) in her place from atop her head. “You can’t use your sorcery right now, right?! So what are we gonna do?! I don’t have my sword, and you don’t really have a weapon, either! Doesn’t that mean there’s basically nothing we can do?! Come on, Orphen, say something already—”

Orphen stared dumbfounded at the girl who was screaming at him in a voice loud enough to echo all around the chamber. He clutched at his head and said, in a voice almost like he was crying, “You... dumb bitch...”

“Well... You’ll figure something out.” Salua’s voice was exasperated, and just a little hopeless. After that comment, he turned back to Quo.

Light was rushing out from Quo’s back like a waterfall. Like gleaming wings. The wings made solely of light made the large man look almost like an angel—or perhaps a devil.

Orphen decided to leave him to Salua and turned toward the priest soldiers. He and Salua were back-to-back now. As Claiomh bounced over to him, he spat at her, “You—” but then, beyond her...

Orphen felt the blood draining from his face. He almost dropped his baton as

he shouted, “Majic! Wait—stop!”

As the priest soldiers advanced towards them, Majic faced them with his hands together in front of him. He glared at his targets, a look of intense concentration on his face. A vast composition was taking form around the small boy, and Orphen watched it form, feeling like he was in a nightmare.

Still concentrating, Majic said to him, “I just need to make sure the building doesn’t come down on us, right? I know Claiomh can’t hold back, but I can.” A pure white flame lit itself in front of the hands the boy held in front of him.

The priest soldiers all stopped nervously. Orphen couldn’t see their expressions due to the masks they wore, but he could see the fear in their eyes clearly enough.

Orphen stood, frozen in place—at this stage of activation, interfering with it would be more dangerous—pulling Claiomh to him. If the sorcery went out of control, there was no telling what could happen.

Majic put his magic into the composition, a cornered look on his face. The flame shone bright as the boy threw his hands forward and shouted, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

The wave of heat and light crashed against the priest soldiers—or it was about to, but just before it did, a wall of light appeared before Majic. A wall made up of countless lines that together formed a stream. The lines coiled together in a complex pattern, blocking Majic’s attack, which exploded against them.

The burst of white flames enveloped even its caster. With a thunderous roar, the force of the explosion and the hot wind it produced enveloped Majic. Orphen couldn’t hear him scream...

“Majic?!” Claiomh shouted, running over to him.

Orphen was about to follow, but stopped. He turned around, a chill going down his spine as he laid his eyes on Quo Vadis Pater.

The wings of light that had sprouted from Quo’s armor had vanished. It was without a doubt those wings that had appeared in front of Majic. And the pattern in the net of silver light had been...

“Wyrd Glyphs...?” The truth was beyond Orphen’s comprehension. A Kimluck Church killer using dragon magic? Quo merely sneered back at him.

“Ifrit. The Demon’s Armor,” Salua said, still with his back to Orphen. “Your sorcery won’t work on the big guy.”

Orphen felt something rising from the depths of his memory at those words. It happened naturally, without him consciously thinking about it.

The Kamisunda Theater, where he’d met Mädchen. And that armor.

The crimson armor, with its functionality. Celestial ruins the Kimluck Church had concealed...

“...It’s a Celestial relic!” Most of the Celestial weapons remaining on the continent were created back in the sorcerer-hunting days, to give regular humans without magic the ability to fight against sorcerers. These weapons, crafted with Celestial magic, far surpassed human sorcery. It wouldn’t be at all strange for there to be armor that protected its wearer completely from sorcery.

Quo said nothing in response. The wings of light returned to him, flapping around him like a thin curtain.

Salua ran at him, holding his baton sideways. “I’ll take care of him! You get those priest soldiers!”

Orphen turned his back to the charging Salua and looked in Majic’s direction. Claiomh was holding him up, but he appeared to be knocked out. A huge explosion had happened right next to him—at a glance, he looked to have some pretty serious burns, and the cloak he was wearing was singed black. Orphen could see his chest rising and falling furiously. He wasn’t dead yet.

Claiomh was shaking him and wailing, “Majic! Come on! Answer me, why don’t you!”

Seeing the threat of sorcery was now gone, the priest soldiers were starting to rush the two of them.

“Dammit!” Orphen cursed, rushing at the priest soldiers, baton in hand. Five or six of the 24 turned to face him.

I can't distract all of them... He couldn't see Claiomh and Majic anymore. The rest of the priest soldiers had surrounded them. All he could hear was Claiomh's shrill shouting, but he didn't know what was happening to them.

The priest soldier closest to him attacked before he could. Their weapons were the same—batons. Orphen caught the downward swing with his elbow. Pain ran through him, down to the bone, but he ignored it. Without even time to gripe about it, he struck the soldier between the eyes with the grip of the baton, since his arm was already up. His own blow blocked his view of the soldier's face, but Orphen just made out the man's eyes rolling up into his head.

As the man slowly collapsed, Orphen snatched his baton with his free left hand. He glanced in Claiomh's direction again, but still only saw the soldiers surrounding them. Sending the baton in his right hand sliding across the floor, he shouted, "Claiomh, use this!" He didn't know if she'd even be able to pick it up in the chaos, but he could hope.

He decided not to think about the possibility that they'd already beaten her to death.

Either way, his next opponent was coming at him already—make that two opponents. They came at him from both sides, leaving a little space between them in the middle. Stance already low from tossing his baton, Orphen threw himself forward. He rolled once, and when he came back up again, the two of them had gone past him.

He didn't have time to turn around. He was completely surrounded at this point.

He blocked one baton coming down at his head as he rose with his own weapon, the sharp sound of metal clashing against metal piercing his eardrum. In the second that his adversary was stopped, he finished rising. As the soldier in front of him lifted his baton again, Orphen rushed forward and exhaled hard, shoving his elbow into his enemy's body.

The second one went down.

There's no end to them...! No matter which direction he looked, all he saw was enemies.

Surrounded again and again by enemies on his left and right, in front of him and behind him, sometimes above and below him, Orphen just kept moving, barely under conscious control. Sometimes the figures in white seemed to double as the sand in the air blurred his vision. After striking, defending, and felling so many people he lost count—falling himself a few times as well—Orphen suddenly stopped.

He stood still, baton in hand. He'd been doing nothing but reacting to attacks constantly until then, but... the attacks had stopped.

He looked down and saw four—no, five collapsed priest soldiers. A little ways away was the first one he'd taken down. To his side was Claiomh, also a little ways away from him. She was standing over Majic protectively with Leki on her head, and she'd either picked up the baton he'd tossed her, or she'd wrested one away from one of the other soldiers, because she had one in hand. Three soldiers lay at her feet. She was looking Orphen's way, expression surprised.

What...? He couldn't understand exactly what was going on. The rest of the priest soldiers had backed away from them to surround them at a distance at some point. There were 14 of them remaining... They stood in a circle around them, but didn't attack. There was bewilderment in their eyes.

14. 14? *There's one... missing?* Orphen realized, then looked around and found one soldier standing behind him.

"What?!" When Orphen spun around, the soldier brought his baton down with frightening speed. Orphen leapt back to dodge and tried to get back into a fighting stance, but his opponent was too fast—By the time he realized Claiomh hadn't been staring at him but at this soldier, Orphen was already blocking a second blow from the soldier's baton. He gave the impression that he was leaping back again, but jumped to the side instead.

As he jumped, he took aim at the soldier's right thigh with his baton, but the soldier anticipated this move and dodged.

"Orphen!" Claiomh shouted, but he had no time to respond to her. He didn't have time to listen!

"Tch!" He couldn't win as long as he was armed with the same weaponry, Orphen decided, so he tossed aside his baton. He faced off against his opponent

with his fists up. He couldn't see the bottom of the soldier's face through his mask, but his eyes were locked on to Orphen's.

Brown eyes.

Orphen stopped, on the verge of a realization, but before clarity came, his opponent launched an attack. Just before she moved, she relaxed the hand with the baton in it, then gripped it hard again. It was a simple feint. She thrust out with the baton straight at him.

He had no choice but to counterattack. Orphen spun, turning away from the baton and using the momentum to propel a backhand at his opponent's ear. Just then—

“Orphen! That one—”

He stopped his fist at Claiomh's voice. His opponent stopped as well. They were frozen, the soldier with her baton thrust out, and Orphen with his fist about to hit her.

“That one...” Claiomh said slowly. “Helped me...”

The priest soldier smirked and opened the hand with the baton in it—the baton fell to the floor and hit it with a loud clang. Orphen could hear her muttering something under the sound.

“Come—”

And in her open hand, Orphen could sense something like the air hardening...

A few seconds later, a long rod appeared in her hand—no, it was a huge sword. And one he recognized.

At some point, she'd ripped off her mask, and what Orphen felt when he saw her face went far beyond recognition. There was an impish smile on her face as she looked at him.

Orphen backed up, startled, and called her name, “Azalie!”

“You came after all.” That was all she said. Azalie brandished the Celestial-made Sword of Baldanders and slashed the end of the priest soldier uniform she had on. Countless sorcerous runes lit up on the blade, enlarged, and then moved to her ripped clothes. The clothes melted away within the light.

A moment later, her clothes had changed to the black combat uniform Orphen had seen her in before.



After the change, she gave Orphen a wink and stabbed the sword into the floor. It sunk into the stone easily and stood itself up—there must have still been some magic at work in the blade.

“What’s with the new look?”

At her words, Orphen all of a sudden became aware of how he looked right now. He was all beat up, covered in dirt and sand, and wearing white top to bottom. What had once looked like acolyte’s clothes were now nothing more than rags.

“Ah, I, uhh...” Orphen hurriedly patted himself down, though there was no way that would remove any of the dirt covering him.

While he did that, Azalie pulled the sword out from the floor and pointed it his way. She had its tip at his clothes in no time at all. Then she used the same process to transfer light from the blade to his clothes, and the beat-up rags transformed into the leather jacket he was used to wearing.

Azalie smiled, seeing him in his usual black getup. “That looks way better on you. White really is not your color.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Claiomh popped in to say, holding Majic up.

“Whatever.” Orphen backed away from the Sword of Baldanders and looked at the priest soldiers around them, suddenly remembering their existence.

They still seemed confused, but looked as if they had enough of a grip on the situation to make the correct judgment. That is, kill them all.

Back in his regular outfit, Orphen turned to the slowly approaching priest soldiers. His clothes had transformed, but he didn’t have his dragon pendant or any weapons. He stood ready, starting to regret tossing aside his baton earlier. They were surrounded, so the priest soldiers weren’t just approaching from the front. Orphen was starting to feel nervous, recalling the wall of light that had repelled Majic’s sorcery earlier. If it would do the same to Azalie’s sorcery, then the situation they found themselves in was largely unchanged.

However...

Orphen dropped his fists when he felt a hand land on his shoulder. He turned

and found Azalie giving him a relaxed smile, sword resting on her shoulder. Her eyes flicked from his to the floor.

Orphen followed her gaze and noticed that where she'd stuck the sword into the floor before, there were shining glyphs.

She stepped on the glyphs with her foot, and—

“Waaaaaaaah!” The scream came from the priest soldiers. They were all shooting up toward the ceiling, at a terrifying speed—beneath each one, the floor had transformed into a pillar about a meter in diameter that was racing up to the ceiling. And the ceiling was high. Maybe not ten, but definitely eight meters. It was hard to see that high because the light from the lanterns on the walls barely reached up there. The pillars stopped a split second before splattering the priest soldiers against the ceiling. And the light of the glyphs at Azalie's feet faded.

“You can go ahead and jump down—” she taunted the priest soldiers on top of the pillars. “—but it's a stone floor down here. Think real hard about it, okay?”

“...Wow...” Claiomh was clearly impressed.

Azalie shrugged, giving her (and Leki) a couple pats on the head. She said to her, but really to Orphen, “I've gotten pretty good with this sword.” Her smile faded when she saw the look on Orphen's face, a forlorn expression replacing it. “Don't make that face. Sure, we've got some history with this thing, but a tool's a tool. If you're smart, there's plenty of ways to use it.”

Orphen shook his head and asked something completely unrelated. “When'd you sneak in here?”

“I'd like to ask you the same thing. I'd guess... about the same time you did.”

Orphen watched her closely as she answered.

She stood right there next to him, like it was the most natural thing in the world. Azalie. The Chaos Witch. His sister. The woman he'd been chasing after for so long...

“I—” He tried to speak, and felt a sharp pain in his lungs. He tried to look at

her, and his eyelids stung. He tried to think, and his headache resurfaced. No matter what he did, it was the same. *All I can feel for her is pain...*

He knew what he had to say to her. It didn't matter where he said it, but it had to be now. Orphen opened his mouth. But she was gone.

He blinked, confused. He thought he'd been watching her the entire time, but she had crouched down at some point without him noticing. He looked down and found that she had taken Majic's body from Claiomh and was looking him over, determining how bad his wounds were.

"Azalie?"

Naturally, she thought he was inquiring about Majic's wounds. Looking at the worst of them, the burn on his arms, she said, "He'll be in trouble if we don't heal him soon. But..."

"But?" Claiomh repeated blankly.

Orphen nodded in understanding and turned around. He'd never forgotten.

Beyond the 14 pillars that had pushed the priest soldiers to the ceiling, through the mist of the whirling sands, the giant with the wings of light was walking toward them. Orphen listened to Azalie as he watched Quo Vadis Pater walk silently toward them, dragging a maimed Salua Solude along with him.

"I dunno if he'll give us that time..."

Regardless of if Azalie did it or if Claiomh had Leki do it, healing sorcery took time. Just closing up external wounds was simple enough, but for deep wounds like Majic currently had, the healer really had to concentrate and spend time fixing them.

If we just abandon Majic and fight him three-on-one, we might actually have a chance... They'd managed to improve what had been a disastrous situation all the way to three-on-one. It would be incredibly foolish to let it go right back to disastrous.

Orphen put his hand to his head, thinking such cynical thoughts. He became even more cynical when he did so. Of course. That was just like Azalie. She'd forgotten his bandana when she'd transformed his clothes. Or maybe she'd

meant to leave it out.

Of course, he'd never be what she wanted him to be without his sorcery.

Not Krylancelo. Not the Successor of the Razor's Edge.

Not a replacement for Childman.

"Orphen."

"Krylancelo."

Called by Azalie and Claiomh at the same time, Orphen turned around, not even sure himself which name he was responding to. He shrugged his shoulders.

...He's a real piece of work as an apprentice, jumping down his master's throat and all. He smiled and made up his mind. Not that there was much to make up in the first place.

He gestured at the slowly walking Quo and told them, "I don't think he's going to give us the time. So I'll make it for you. How long will it take you to heal Majic?"

"Five minutes," Azalie said quietly, and began forming a spell composition.

Claiomh stood and went to Orphen's side, gripping the baton she'd picked up tightly. "I'll back you up, Orphen." At the same time, Leki raised his head on top of hers.

However, if Quo's armor was powered by Celestial magic, it was likely that it would deflect anything a Deep Dragon, and a baby Deep Dragon at that, could throw at it.

Orphen decided not to say anything about that. He kept his eyes on Quo and gave Claiomh a pat on the head. "Well, I *could* use backup."

"Orphen?!" Claiomh shouted, half surprised and half delighted, but Orphen pretended not to notice that.

Quo's feet... stopped. The winged Death Instructor in the crimson armor stopped dragging Salua's body behind him and dropped it to the floor. Salua still seemed to be breathing, but he wasn't conscious. There were wounds all over

his just-healed body. Likely caused by the shortsword in Quo's hand.

Orphen spoke. "So you're... Quo Vadis Pater. The head of the Death Instructors... is that right?" Quo didn't answer, but Orphen didn't let that bother him. He kept going. "I'm the one who killed Name Only."

He could sense someone's surprised reaction to this, but it wasn't Quo. It was Azalie, behind him. He didn't turn around to her, though. Quo remained expressionless.

Orphen relaxed his face as well, to mimic Quo's lack of emotion. "I won't threaten to make you join him or anything. I'm just here to buy some time."

Quo smiled. Dawn was breaking.



He was sure the magic would kill him, at first... but as that feeling lessened, he frowned. As she drew more and more glyphs in the air, power gathered around her, an overwhelming pressure forming with it. But that power was almost like...

"Stop, please!" he found himself shouting. He put the dagger down. "You can't have the energy to cast such a huge spell—"

"Wonderful insight, my child." Isterviva's voice was proud. There might have even been a smile on her face. But as that face rapidly dried and cracked, it became unable to form anything that could truly be called an expression.

The dragon priestess was destroying her body in exchange for the power currently gathering at her hands. Not just her face. Her brilliant green hair, which had almost seemed to shine, withered and fell away, turned to dust. Her ankles snapped, no longer able to support her weight, and she fell to her knees, but her fingers never stopped moving, continuing to draw the glyphs.

Her words also continued. "It's incredible work. I think this will be the second grandest spell I've cast in my life."

"But..." All he could do was watch her, trembling. He couldn't even move. It was completely unthinkable for him to attempt to stand against the glyphs forming around her. Not against the magic of the strongest priestess of the

Weird Dragons—other than the Ayrmankar—Istersiva.

She drew countless glyphs, traced their forms, and released them, and they gathered in one spot. They all shone with a silver light, no two the same yet all forming a single spell. And none falling below the standard set by the whole.

All he could do was watch, powerless, as the woman crumbled before him.

“This glyph will kill you. It will disassemble you into your smallest component pieces, and then reconstruct you several hundred years in the future.” The light glyphs were growing larger by the second. Larger and brighter. “With our power, we cannot transport you through time, but we can mimic the effect. This will be another good lesson for you.”

When the light finally filled the room, he screamed. He cried out in abject terror at the fear and awe shooting through him. But he didn’t even know what it was he was afraid of, or what he was in awe of.

What was he expecting...? That the light would kill him? Then it would be fear of death.

Was it that the woman he loved the most, and feared the most, was crumpling powerlessly before him? Then it would be awe of death. Of the absolute end that was death.

By the time his scream had faded, the light, too, was gone.

He was standing. And she was collapsed, like a pile of rags. Only her face pointed up at him. Behind her was the beautiful portrait that no longer resembled her in the slightest.

And in between him and her, a lone glyph floated in the air. The glyph was floating slowly and soundlessly toward him.

Horribly slowly. It would probably take minutes to reach him.

Istersiva’s voice, a barely audible groan, spilled into the space. “This glyph is... my... my final spell.”

He could say nothing in response. He merely stared at the glyph.

“If you touch the glyph... your body will be destroyed, and recreated several hundred years later, somewhere on this continent. However...” That familiar

self-deprecation entered her voice. “However, you could also easily avoid the glyph... You could walk right past it and finish me off. My child. You are capable of making this decision. So I leave it to you. Whatever your decision, it is not important to me. My death cannot be avoided at this point. This fortress is as fine a place as any for the grave of my kind. I will not be so boorish as to resist death at the foot of my own grave.”

He didn’t know what she was saying. He tried to scream out once more, but his voice wouldn’t come.

No. He shook his head. He didn’t *want* to understand her dying! She had been leaving him a will all this time. He stood unmoving, staring at the glyph. He had no idea if she knew what he was doing as she went on.

“Whatever decision you make, this will take some time. For I must tell you a very long story...”

Chapter VI: Her Story Ended

It was just before dawn.

Azalie the Chaos Witch could sense that instinctively. Of course, there were no signs visible from the underground cathedral, but she nevertheless sensed it was true.

Maybe it was all in her head, but the fact remained that dawn was approaching.



Mädchen Amick sat in an alley before dawn, pelted by rain, empty eyes glinting.

If the sun had risen, it was blocked off by the dark clouds hanging over the Holy City.

With the city under martial law, there was no one else in the alley. There wasn't even any sign of life. Mädchen hugged her body, wet from the rain, cold, stiff, getting heavier and heavier, and wrapped a cloth tight around her injured arm. The blue cloth she usually wrapped around her head. Though, wet with rain and blood as it was now, it had the color of a black rose.



Majic slept in darkness, unaware of the dawn.

He had no idea what had happened—just that he'd been thrown here with a flash of light.

He could feel someone touching him. Some power soothing his body, which was paralyzed with pain.

Oh. I know her. She's Master's... he found himself thinking for reasons he couldn't understand.



Salua was frustrated that he couldn't see the dawn.

He wrested himself out of the depths of his muddled consciousness. His mouth and nose both reeked of blood. He raised his head, nauseated by a sticky feeling on his tongue. He tried to crawl forward on his stomach, but neither of his arms were really obeying him.

“Not here... Krylancelo!” Something warm was rising in his throat. And he was sure it wasn't bile. “The Poet's Chamber... If that gate opens, Quo's most powerful weapons will be—gwah!”

The warmth in his throat got stuck somewhere around his chest. Quo's boot hit the back of his head and Salua sank back into unconsciousness...



Orphen trembled with the approach of dawn. Not for any particular reason that he could tell. It was just that there was a grinding sensation all throughout his body... like bent wires were writhing about beneath his skin.

Dawn was breaking.

“The Poet's... Chamber?” he repeated Salua's words, shaking off the pain. *The Poet's Chamber...* “Past that gate?”

The vast gate looming behind Quo. The complex grating made it impossible to see beyond it and made the gate seem rather showy. *The Poet's Chamber, the lowest level of the cathedral, that most people don't know about.* Orphen recalled Salua saying something like that. He didn't know exactly what it was, but it must have been an important room in the cathedral.

But either way, the door was behind Quo. They wouldn't be able to get inside this Poet's Chamber without getting past him.

Quo Vadis Pater watched them calmly, wings of light spread out behind him. His eyes were full of unconcealed bloodlust. Salua lay at his feet. In his right hand was a shortsword that looked ridiculous next to his huge frame. A jet-black sword utterly devoid of faults. It had a dark luster, like it was carved from obsidian. Amid the swirling sands, the man looked like a Demon King who would impartially deal out death, or like a spirit that would lead deceased soldiers back home.

Orphen half-closed one eye, centering his vision around the man, and began to form a spell composition. But he felt a pain like his forehead was being gouged into and quickly gave up.

I thought so... He still couldn't use his sorcery. Name Only's dying face, stained with tears of blood, flashed before his eyes.

"Heh heh heh..." came a laughing voice. It was Quo. A small smile on his face, he muttered mirthfully, "The Sword of Baldanders, eh? One of the weapons given to those of the Dragon Faith by the Celestials back during the war. Created without limits so that it could stand up against sorcery's many effects, it disassembles and reconstructs any matter the blade cuts into. However, it didn't see use in the war because the concentration required to perform the reconstruction was too difficult for people without any training to use. But I suppose a sorcerer would be able to handle it. How ironic." He shrugged his shoulders.

"The number of glyphs in the blade is 1,084. To summarize, they're something like... 'I am the beginning and the end. A beast of time.' I have plenty more trivia... It would take time to give you a detailed explanation, but I've studied most existing tools. It's not very enticing as a weapon."

Orphen merely listened in silence. Quo didn't seem to be expecting any sort of reaction either.

He went on, in a lighthearted tone, "Are you surprised? I'm sure you thought the Tower of Fangs was the only place equipped to handle Celestial relics... But their power is immense. Naturally, we also study them. It took some time for us to decipher the Wyrd Glyphs on our own. And I'm sure the capital has realized that we are concealing ruins from them, but they haven't made an issue of it yet."

"Doesn't the Kimluck Church worship the goddesses of fate, the Weird Sisters? I thought you guys hated the dragons of legend who stole their magic from the gods," Orphen spat, but his words didn't seem to have any effect on Quo.

Quo just snorted derisively and said, "We are not idiots. We will use what we can. The dragons are the dragons. They have nothing to do with us humans. We

will do as we like.”

“This is one conversation—” Claiomh butted in, out of breath. She’d started running at Quo’s left side at some point, holding Leki to her side like she was about to throw him. “—I am *not* interested in!”

After her shout, a foggy light appeared around Quo. Leki’s green eyes were open and staring at him. The light flickered, turned to flame, and shook.



There was a great explosion, and Orphen took off running when he saw Quo inside of it, wings wrapped around his body. Toward the figure trapped inside the blazing pillar of flame.

He shouldn't be able to do anything while he's using his wings to defend himself... He might be able to open the door now.

He shouted as he ran, "Claiomh, break through that door!"

"Okay!" She raised her hand cheerfully, like he'd just asked her to go shopping or something. She spun to the door and—went flying.

"Aaaaaaah!" Hit by a wing that stretched out from the pillar of flames, Claiomh rolled pretty dramatically across the floor thanks to her lightweight frame. Leki rolled in a different direction. She'd probably flung him aside so that she didn't take him down with her. The girl rolled across the floor, long blonde hair spinning after her like a fireball, and crashed into a wall. With a short yelp, she went still, limbs splayed out.

Leki blinked on the floor and rolled one more time on his own.

"...What?!" Orphen groaned, his expectations thoroughly betrayed. Still, he continued to run. Before him, he could see the pillar of flame split in two, and Quo in the middle of it. One of his wings was extended, the other, wrapped around himself. That wing also extended soundlessly as Quo turned to him, still expressionless.

The armor on his back... Orphen had realized something, though he wasn't sure how useful it was. Those two plates of red armor on his back... the threads of light forming the wings extended from them. When he looked closer, he could see that the tips of the plates had eroded and transformed into the light. The glittering light around him was just an afterimage. The threads wove together to form the wings.

He didn't have time to stop running—if he stopped, Quo would surely finish them off, starting with Claiomh. On the other hand, if he got close enough, it would actually make it harder to use those wings.

Watching Orphen's approach, Quo held up the black shortsword in his hand. He ran his other hand over its blade.

That's a strange stance... Orphen thought, but if his opponent's weapon was a shortsword, that was convenient for him.

Five more steps... Quo's fingers ran over his blade.

Three more steps. He thought he saw the corner of his mouth drawing up, exposing his white teeth.

Two more. It would be less than a second now.

But in that less than a second, something burst through Orphen's mind and he leapt to the side. It wasn't the wings of light this time, but something black that sped past him.

Orphen didn't stop when his feet hit the floor, instead throwing himself forward. He rolled once and got back to his feet, then jumped back again.

And after each of those movements, he could sense that sharp presence chasing him. It bent like a whip, drawing a black S in the floor behind him with a terrible screech before returning back to Quo.

"This is..." Because he'd jumped back, he'd gained some distance from Quo again. Orphen pressed his feet to the ground, preparing himself to jump again whenever he needed to.

Quo's shortsword had stretched to the length of a longsword. No, that wasn't right.

All the smirking Death Instructor held in his hand was the grip of the black shortsword. Its blade hung in the air, separated like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The pieces were just arranged in such a way as to make it look like a longer version of the blade when they were put together. Quo raised the grip and the blade raised with it as if that were completely natural. Then the large man swung—and Orphen dove down. He rose after making sure the swarm of blades was finished passing overhead.

The blades had separated farther so that they stretched out across several meters. When Quo pulled the grip back, the blades contracted. It looked as if the grip controlled all the movement. He wielded the group of blades like a whip.

The fragments of blade flew around like a meteor shower. As Orphen dodged the black blades coming at him from front and back, left and right, he heard Quo's voice.

"This is the Sword of Moord Aur. A very valuable blade." As the segments of blade extended, the gaps in between them widened as well, but you could be fatally wounded if struck by even one of the pieces. Though there were a limited number of pieces, so it would be somewhat less intimidating if stretched out over a few dozen meters.

Each piece of the blade had an odd shape. Almost like letters. In actuality, they were likely glyphs.

Dammit! As Orphen dodged the blades' merciless assault, he was all too aware that he was only creating more and more distance from Quo. The farther away he was, the greater he was at a disadvantage—he had no sorcery! He might have trained in martial arts at the Tower, but all the techniques sorcerers possessed relied upon *sorcery* at their core. Everything he knew started and ended with sorcery. He gnashed his teeth, knowing exactly where he stood now that he was without it.

I can't do anything! I'm powerless... He clicked his tongue and jumped back, putting him a few dozen meters away from Quo.

Quo's attacks ceased there—that must have been the limit to which the Sword of Moord Aur could extend. The sections of blade flowed together, shrinking down to the length of his arm.

"Do you think you can beat me if I don't have this armor and sword, Sorcerer?" The wings at his back spread out gracefully as he spoke. The Death Instructor glanced down at Salua at his feet and admitted it easily. "You could."

Orphen put his hand to his chest, trying to catch his breath as he mentally cursed the man.

Quo continued quietly. "Let me tell you why this man betrayed us. 'The Kimluck Church will fall if it continues under its current structure?' That is not true. This foolish youth was just bored by this city..."

Orphen noticed the sword slyly extending once more. He dropped down into

a ready stance. At this distance, even if the Death Instructor pushed the attack, the gaps between his blades would be wide enough to easily dodge them.

“Bored? I have never been bored here. I have always...” Quo held the grip of the blade low at his side. “Always been afraid!” And he thrust the sword out.

The sword stretched swiftly—true, if it was a thrust, then the gaps between the blades didn’t matter.

“You sound like Name!” Orphen blurted out, dodging to the side. Then he rushed Quo before the man could pull the blade back.

“That’s only natural! He’s my son!” Quo’s shout distracted Orphen. And with a flick of his wrist, the extended sword swung to the side.

Orphen let out a soundless scream as the blades flew at him. Of course, there were gaps between the blades, so he wasn’t bisected, but a few of the fragments grazed him, leaving lacerations on his side and chest.

Orphen tumbled to the floor, enduring the pain and shock of his wounds. He wasn’t bleeding too badly, but the pain was excruciating, perhaps due to the complex shape of the blades that had cut him.

Resisting the urge to claw at the floor and roll around, Orphen hit the floor with his elbow, rolling himself onto his back. Suddenly, the Moord Aur blade was stabbing into the floor where he had just been. Orphen rolled again, onto his stomach once more, then stood. He raised his head desperately and his eyes pierced through the whirling sands to meet the Death Instructor’s.

“You—”

“He *was* my son,” Quo corrected dispassionately. He pulled the sword back to him and continued, “He died? How?”

“He...” Orphen started to answer, then froze, his body racked with pain. His vision warped from the pain of his cuts and the strengthening throbbing in his head.

You killed me! Name Only’s voice called from somewhere.

Orphen put his hands to his chest, digging his nails in as he felt his consciousness fading. The pain was destroying his will.

I'm... weak... That thought was the last thing he was left with.

That was when it happened.

“Krylancelo! Jump!” It was like cold water poured into the boiling pot of his brain—Azalie’s voice.

Orphen reflexively jumped. After he did, he heard her shout.

“Waves!”

His vision was blurry, so he couldn’t quite make it out, but he thought he could see a familiar composition forming around her. One wholly Azalie’s, precise as it was powerful.

She was still by Majic’s side. He could only spare a glance at them, so he couldn’t be certain, but she must have finished healing him. She’d laid him down on the floor and stood tall at his side now, her right arm held up as the composition around her grew more complex.

When she activated her spell, the floor at her feet crumbled. The destruction spread out from her like a wave, eroding the floor as it went. From the floor to the wall, from the wall to the ceiling, it spiraled out from her. Minute tremors went through everything, causing the columns in the room—including the pillars that had lifted up the priest soldiers—to sway dubiously. Several batons on the floor also crumbled into dust at the same time.

There was nothing other than sorcery that could defend against this chain of destruction. When the havoc reached Quo, he planted his wings in the ground before him and the waves of destruction split in two, flowing past him on both sides.

“Aaaaaaaah!” Claiomh screamed somewhat belatedly, but in her case, one glance from Leki, who she was holding at her chest, stopped the destruction before it reached them.

All this happened in the single second that Orphen was in the air after he jumped and before he hit the floor again.

The destruction rushed to the wall behind Quo, and the gate as well. Azalie’s sorcery finally ended after demolishing half of the hall.

Would the cathedral fall? Orphen looked up at the ceiling with a shudder, but it didn't seem to be coming down. The building must have been more solidly constructed than he thought.

Azalie lowered her right arm, then transferred the Sword of Baldanders from her left hand to her right. With a smirk—a truly frightful, vicious look—she spat, “How impudent. You’re just a Kimluck guard dog.”

“That power... Let me guess. You’re Azalie, the Chaos Witch. So Childman’s strongest black sorcery student lives,” Quo said, tone low, as he spread the wings that had been protecting him. The floor under him alone was like a lone island in a sea of destruction. Fortunately, Salua was in the unscathed region as well. Quo wearily kicked him out onto the destroyed floor and said, “What are you here for? Just to bring your chaos to the Holy City?”

“Sorry, but I wouldn’t want to drag my ass to this sandy hellhole no matter who asked me to. But I left something undone.”

“...Undone?” Orphen asked, butting into the exchange.

Azalie glanced at him and showed him a smile, though a somewhat worried one. “I never heard his last will, and felt like I might be able to hear it if I came here.”

“Nonsense!” Quo shouted, enraged. “I don’t know what filthy work brings you here, but I am this Holy City’s protector! You don’t really think you’ll leave here alive, do you?!”

Azalie raised her left arm in response. “Light!” Flames swelled up before her.

When Majic had done something similar, his attack had been thrown back at him, but the composition Azalie formed surpassed his in scale, precision, and speed, several times over. The light spit thunder and lightning out around it as it sped straight toward Quo.

The light wings of Quo’s armor closed—*boom!*—there was a thunderous impact and Orphen brought his arms up to cover his face. He squinted his eyes as he protected his face from the blast, trying to see what was happening. The fire Azalie had unleashed engulfed Quo in roaring flames.

However... Quo was still unharmed inside the inferno. He stood undaunted in

the flames even as they smashed through stone and melted iron. From this, it was clear that his wings provided a basically perfect defense.

Eventually, the flames subsided, and a completely unharmed Quo was revealed from inside them. He flapped the wings to sweep away the aftermath of the flames and held the Sword of Moord Aur up to Orphen.

“It’s all futile—”

“Let me guess. You’re one of those ‘book smart’ types,” Azalie said, nonplussed. She shrugged her shoulders with an easy smile. “Did you decipher those glyphs yourself? It would be impossible to wield a Celestial weapon so precisely without the skills to interpret them. It’s impressive if it’s true. By my reckoning, you might be a more skilled interpreter than dozens of the ones at the Tower of Fangs combined. You’ve got a handle on that weapon that I would have said was impossible for someone with no sorcerous training to have...”

“You compliment me. I’m grateful for your open-mindedness, Chaos Witch.”

“Oh? What I did was call you an idiot.”

You need to be careful when she seems like she’s in a strangely good mood. Orphen was well aware of this, but he was also too busy being dumbfounded to say anything.

“Anyway, I didn’t tell you what my goal was. Where do you think I was headed, sneaking into the cathedral like this?” Azalie gracefully pointed behind Quo. “Also, when I disrupt matter, it’ll hold its form if nothing interferes with it, but with the slightest impact, it all crumbles rather easily. I think you should look behind you, umm... Quo Vadis Pater, was it?”

A crack in Quo’s composure appeared at Azalie’s words. It was a look of shock so perfect that it had wiped away all traces of his previous expression. He whipped his huge body around surprisingly quickly.

And behind him. The wall. The door. Both had crumbled completely into rubble. It had likely happened when Quo had blocked Azalie’s fire attack. There was now a hole opened up where they used to be, revealing what Salua had called the Poet’s Chamber.

“What the...?” Orphen muttered in incomprehension. There was something

that didn't make sense in front of him.

It seemed like "chamber" was just a name for the space. Orphen had been expecting some sort of hall, but it wasn't that. Beyond the broken wall was a space like a natural cavern. It wasn't like a limestone cave, but just a vast cavern.

Incredibly vast. It looked like it continued far off into the distance. It was just as wide, too. It descended like a sheer cliff from this hallway, almost like a valley with a roof on it had been buried underground. He looked down into it to see that the bottom was like a subterranean lake. There was still water at the bottom, reflecting the dark blackness of the space. Orphen's intuition told him that all the rain that flowed underground must gather here. But it really was spacious...

Of course, the cavern was just a cavern. What Orphen was staring, stupefied, at was the figure floating inside the space.

Floating, as if suspended in the air. The first thing that caught Orphen's eye about the figure was the color green. Flowing, green hair. A green robe...

The figure was a beautiful woman. She floated in the air deep inside the cave, maybe the length of a city block from the cliff of the hallway. Her limbs had an ethereal grace even as they hung limply at her sides.

Why was she floating there? That simple thought was all that came to mind at first. Then he quickly perceived the answer.

From the space just next to her, an arm was jutting out, illogically. As if springing from thin air. The arm also belonged to a woman, and it was holding the floating woman in the air.

Fingers tight around her slender neck.

Her neck looked completely broken. It was bent at a disturbing angle. She should have been dead. But Orphen squinted his eyes and then took a step back, trembling.

She was staring at him. Neck broken, hanging in the air. Staring straight at him with her green eyes.

“O... Goddess...”

Orphen managed to regain some composure when he heard Quo’s frightened voice. The man kneeled, folding his huge body unnaturally in on itself and bowing his head deeply to the floating woman.

“Please forgive... this grave sin...” He prayed with a trembling voice as if he’d forgotten completely about Orphen and Azalie’s existence.

Azalie also seemed unable to hide her surprise as she stared at the woman, sword hanging limply at her side. It was rare that Orphen saw her with her mouth hanging open like this, but he didn’t really have the time to enjoy the sight. He glanced over at Claiomh and found her making the same sort of expression as she stroked Leki’s head. Majic and Salua were both still unconscious.

Looking around even more, he found the priest soldiers stuck on top of the columns were all prostrating themselves in the same way Quo was.

What... is this? Orphen wondered. Quo had said “Goddess.”

Goddess? An underground cavern. A subterranean lake.

A woman... A goddess? As he tried to organize all the information he had in his brain, Orphen decided to focus on what he could understand. Quo Vadis Pater.

He’d realized that Quo was bowed in the direction of the Poet’s Chamber, completely oblivious to everything else around him. If they were going to capture him, now was the time.

Orphen snuck closer to Quo. Standing, he’d been huge, but folded up like this, he was only the size of a child. His wings had disappeared and he’d cast aside the grip of the Sword of Moord Aur as well. There was nothing protecting him.

No matter how large a man was, Orphen was confident he could knock the guy out if he took him by surprise and got a good hit in. He took one step, then another, all too easily closing the distance that a few minutes ago had seemed insurmountable.

Eventually, Orphen arrived beside Quo. He took a deep breath and raised his

fist, looking down at the back of the man's head—and then...

“Krylancelo! Look out!”

He froze when he heard Azalie's voice.

Next, he felt an impact. A harsh impact and a thundering sound.

Then he felt dizzy. A deep sense of imbalance.

His senses were cut off. And cut off from the outside world, all his brain could feel was a violent sense of vertigo. He lost his sense of equilibrium inside a dizzying maze and crumpled to the side.

The floor he'd been standing on until now vanished.

At the very end, his senses returned... just in time for him to realize he was falling, head-first, into the black water of the rapidly approaching lake.



Before dawn, he suddenly disappeared right before her eyes, sinking into the deep, dark abyss. There was the sound of a small explosion, and he flew backward without so much as a scream. His feet left the floor of the hallway and he plummeted down into the underground lake.

There was nothing she could do to stop it.

“N... No...” All Claiomh could do was gasp in disbelief.



Dawn... Dawn? Quo Vadis Pater snorted in disgust. Dawn mattered not.

He stood, determined to kill them all, including the priest soldiers. He started with Krylancelo.

He gripped his final weapon tight in his large hand: a hard, heavy pistol. As smoke trailed from its barrel, he slowly pointed it at the remaining three intruders and one apostate.

In the dead of night, dawn had seemed far off. Now it was just around the corner. But that mattered not.

There would be no dawn for his life. So it mattered not if the sun rose.



He awoke before dawn often now. Thinking about that with a wry smile, Oleyl rose from his bed. He did not fear old age. It was a privilege to live one's life without desiring any changes to it. As he got up from his bed this morning and looked around, nothing had changed since the day before. Not in his old house, far from the Holy City, where no one remained anymore but him.

He lifted the curtains slightly and peeked outside. There was a faint light in the distance of the southern sky. Sensing an ending to the rain, he slid his feet to the floor from his bed.



Carlotta Mausen did not awake before dawn.



Before dawn...

He laboriously lifted his eyelids, though no sleep would come to him no matter how long they were closed. He did not feel pain, though he did not feel refreshed either. Since that day, he had not slept.

It was quiet in the chapel. He was always enveloped in soft light. He couldn't hear the rain here. At the summit of the cathedral, and its deepest place. The Yggdrasil Cathedral was his armor.

Inside that armor—no, perhaps it was a cradle—Pope Ramonirok let his mind wander. He slowly called, “Anastasia.”

“Yes,” the girl responded. She was always there, waiting, in a corner of the chapel.

“Come.”

“Yes.”

This girl was the only person allowed to part and pass through the thin paper partition in the middle of the chapel. Like always, she gracefully held the paper to the side and passed beneath it, a careful hand against the wall.

She waited with her head cocked when she arrived. Her face was not pointed

at the pope. She waited for his words, scarred eyes downcast. Like a small dog being trained.

Ramoniok sat atop his armchair, hands folded underneath his chin, and watched her carefully. She was just an ordinary girl, nothing special about her. Neither her appearance nor her manner suggested otherwise.

He raised himself from his uncomfortable chair and told her, “Enough with the act.”

“...Huh?” she said in response.

Ramoniok walked slowly toward her. “I said, enough with the act. You can see, can’t you?”

“Of... course I...?” Anastasia backed up, leaning against the wall, her shoulders trembling.

Ramoniok shook his head wordlessly. There was no need for him to advance any faster. He had no reason to hurry. If not ordered to leave, this girl would not go anywhere.

Finally, he drew close enough to reach out and touch her. He stopped, raised his arms, and gently placed his hands around the unmoving girl’s neck.

He spoke calmly as he gradually strengthened his grip. “You noticed Quo last night. By the sound of his footsteps? You think that man makes sound when he moves? You can see. Can’t you?”

“No—”

“I said, you can. Can’t you?”

“I... I can.”

“Do not be afraid. The pope is not angry. The pope does not anger. And... this is not your sin.” Ramoniok lowered his voice, though she could likely not hear him anyway. “The pope’s face must not be seen.”

He looked down at the girl’s face as it pointed upward and continued, “This face has been flayed. The same happens to all who see it. The only person who has truly seen it is the pope... there are none else. This face is the proof of that. Proof that the goddess has stripped me of my fate... That is why, for eternity—”

Faint light filled the chapel with a quiet warmth. As it always would.



Her story ended, and the light glyphs floated before his eyes.

Her story ended, and the hall was silent.

Her story ended.

The glyphs touched his skin. Their light brightened and wrapped around him. The flash pierced his eyes and an intense pain burned through his brain. But he accepted it all without complaint. The pain shouldn't last long.

When next I wake... it will all be... The flash faded and he opened his eyes. The light had not disappeared completely, it had just become faint and uncertain. The gentle light enveloped him comfortingly.

The silver dagger had vanished from his hand—likely disintegrated.

Even now, the light was erasing him. He held on desperately to his sanity as he endured the powerful sense of loss he was feeling. A thought suddenly came to mind and he asked, “The dolls here... What orders do you plan to give them?”

The thousand killer dolls stored in this fortress might have been no threat to dragons, but they had the power to wipe all humanity off the face of this continent.

Istersiva remained silent for a time, but she didn't seem to him to be hesitating. Eventually, she said, “The same order they were given in the sanctuary. These dolls were all modified by the Dragon Faith anyway. They will not accept any orders other than ‘destroy human sorcerers.’ But I will include a condition: After you regenerate, and then die. Before you die, you must choose. If you regenerate successfully, before you die, you must raise a successor to whom you can entrust the fate of the continent. A warrior who will not fear the thousand killer dolls here, and who can contend with the sanctuary. If you do not, you will have no future.” Her words gradually quieted.

As his sense faded, he closed his eyes again. He focused only his ears as her words continued. They were halting now, but he could still hear them.

“...My child... I will die... but I will not disappear... You might... have been... a failure... but... you will still... always remain... my children...”

Everything cut off there.

He fell into a hundred-year sleep in but an instant. A deep, whirling ravine, but an instant.

And...

“You merely accept your master’s orders. I know this.”

The voice echoed coolly through the mausoleum. It was not cool emotion however, but the chill of fate. Of despair, and the chilly envy of a future now unobtainable.

Of despair, and the chilly envy of a future now unobtainable...

To be continued

Another Prologue

He had, for the most part, been able to predict all this. There was no concrete reason for it. The feel of the air around his skin... the sound of the wind... he could even feel a humidity sneaking into the atmosphere. But those weren't reasons.

He just knew. He was sure of it, deep down in his heart, like something that had been established long ago. And it had been—even if “long ago” only felt like an instant to him.

His eyes were closed. They had been ever since her magic had wrapped around him. With his eyes closed and his ears not particularly strained, it was only his consciousness that was sharpened to a point. He quietly focused what you might call his night senses.

He was still not used to these “five senses.” For that reason as well, he was being perhaps overly cautious. Slowly, he urged his muscles to bend one of his fingers. He took several seconds squeezing his hand into a fist, then took twice that to open it back up again. Even the slight numbness caused by the chill of the night was new to him.

He opened his eyes. There wasn't much light. Above him, there was a canopy of branches and leaves from the enormous trees around him. He couldn't see the moon. *There might not even be a moon*, he thought to himself with a wry smile. It was only natural that the world would change. The world he knew and the one he now stood in... what was the same between them, and what was different?

There were some things that he knew. That he'd been told, rather. He could recall every word, every phrase that she had said to him, from the very moment of his birth. Her magic was so powerful that it was capable of that, and his feelings for her were even stronger than that. He knew they were.

He repeated such to himself. There was no need to put his response into words.

Instead, he calmly stood up straight. “So...” And he muttered something that had nothing to do with his answer. “...Is this... it?” At his own words, his mutterings, he narrowed his eyes.

“The world... wasn’t destroyed.” *But is that really true?* A doubt surfaced.

He filled his lungs with air and then expelled it. The cool night air was pleasant. He took another breath, this time not as deep. The clear air satisfied his lungs like nothing ever had before. He felt a smile come to his face unbidden.

Very well. I’ll bet on it. If this air is that of a destroyed world, then I shall submit to annihilation. He was starting to feel confident that it wasn’t, though.

He held his right palm up. His light skin stood out in the darkness. He stared at that hand—a hand he couldn’t believe belonged to him—and let out the breath he’d been holding, along with a spell.

“Light.” And a point of light appeared atop his palm as if forming the third point in a triangle with his fingertips and wrist. It wasn’t a flame, and didn’t waver like one. It was like a momentary flash of light frozen in time above his hand, bright white, devoid of color. It was the light of magic.

When it appeared, the light jumped slightly upward, as if bouncing off of something. Its movement then came to a stop just as suddenly as it had started.

He looked around the now-illuminated area. He was in a forest. He didn’t know much more than that. The elevation seemed high, but he couldn’t see the stars past the trees above him, so he couldn’t pinpoint his location.

He took a breath and lowered his eyes. The trunks of the trees were white like the light illuminating them. White earth. White grass. Even the moss growing on the trees was white.

Like his palm.

Another wry smile. Even that smile was probably as devoid of color as all the rest—though he couldn’t see it himself. Of course, the black robe that he wore was not the color of the light he had created. It was still black. “A color that permits no deviation,” according to the one who’d designed it. True, it was the only thing in the world around him that had maintained its color.

Well, I wonder... He thought with some irony. Maintaining color and simply not changing color. He had to admit they were similar, but they were not the same thing.

“They’re not... Not that it matters.” He put out the light and everything closed around him, the darkness deeper than before.

In the dark of night, his eyes alone shone. He could sense this. He groped around and pulled something silver out of a pocket. A naked dagger. A silver blade. The hilt felt right in his hand. This was likely the only thing that hadn’t changed.

“I am... her child,” he muttered as if possessed. The darkness around him seemed to suck up his breath and voice. “An eternal child, sent forth from the age of war, Muspelheim. I am...”

He began to walk, soundlessly, and with only one question in his heart.

The mission his mother had given him. He would search for as long as it took. As long as he had life, he would carry out this mission.

If the world was not destroyed—if it was not yet destroyed...

Then it would need one. This world. The world that his mother had created... who would succeed that world?

“Who is the successor?”

That was the question in his heart.

Afterword

It's a bit strange to have an "afterword" in the middle of a story with two parts, but I couldn't think of anything else to call this, so that's what it is. If anything, it's more like a little monologue of an intermission, I guess. And since it's a monologue, it will be brought to you by the author himself and no other character. So, this is the end of the ninth book in the series (getting back on topic).

Man, it's rough being at the climax. I mean, I knew this was coming, but. When I'm writing a story, I generally have about 24 hours of time pass over the course of one book, but only six hours have passed in this one. From midnight to dawn (though... it's not like any of them have been 24 hours on the dot. And some of them took place over a few days).

The Kimluck Arc just has so many characters in it, if I want to give them all proper characterization, it ends up taking time for the story to move along. It would have been a lot simpler if they were just stereotypical bad guys like in volume 6. But if I did that, then this climactic part of the story would be over in no time (excuse).

So, the Kimluck Arc, which has become a little drawn out, will be wrapping up in the next book—probably, it should be (nervous smile).

Of course, it's not like the whole series is going to wrap up there. Think of it like the end of the Old West chapter of Live A Live. Or like the end of Part One. But not like the Space Battleship movies where they keep tacking on stuff like "Arrivederci," and "Be Forever," and "Final," but then continue right on making new ones (not that that has anything to do with anything).

As for new developments in this series... I'm still undecided on a lot of things, but I'm sure I'll come up with something around when I finish writing volume 10. I'd like to do some sort of spin-off before then. I'm already using three different settings in the same series, so it's kind of complicated, but maybe I'd want to do a prequel... something that's not Reckless. I try and write one

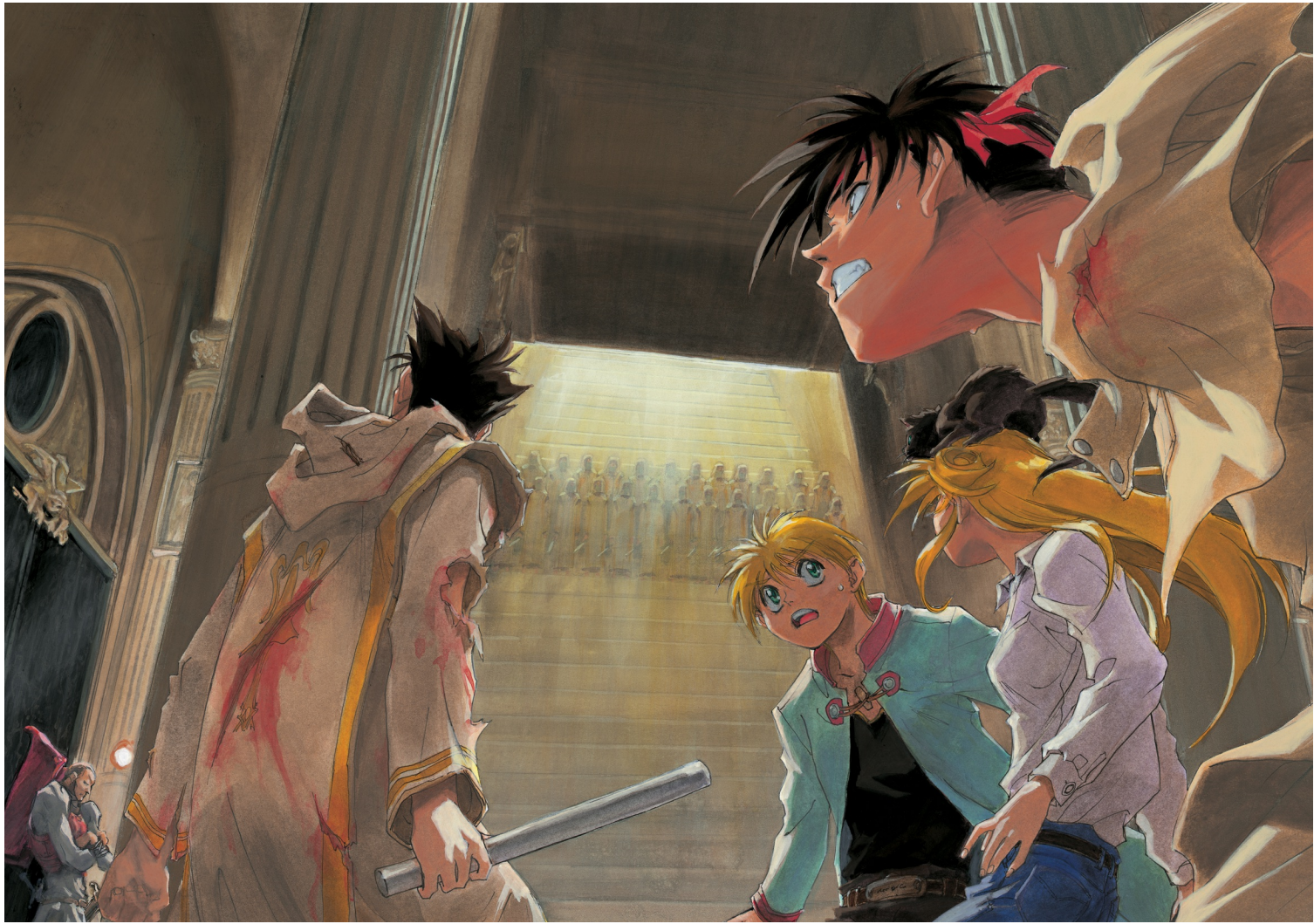
volume of that crazy story and it's already out of hand (leaving this to my future self).

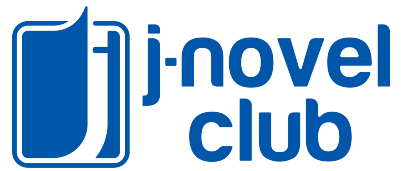
Anywho. Can't have the intermission lasting too long. I'm not finished yet, so I can't put the date here, but I'll wrap this up anyway. This has been Akita (bow).











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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 9

by Yoshinobu Akita

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